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PANTHER PAUL, The Prairie Pirate; or, Dainty Lance to the Rescue.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "YELLOWSTONE JACK," "HURRICANE BILL," "MUSTANG SAM," "NIGHTHAWK KIT," "DAINTY LANCE," ETC., ETC.



HE SAW THE ROCK BENDING MORE AND MORE, AND FELT THAT HE WAS SINKING DOWN STILL NEARER TO A FRIGHTFUL DEATH!

Panther Paul.

THE PRAIRIE PIRATE;

OR,
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CHAPTER I.

A BREAK-NECK CHASE.

A DEEP, narrow valley, that might almost be called a gulch, where the rocks rose high and frowning on either hand, dark with the clumps of evergreens, and darker still under the gloom of a cloudy, midnight sky.

Dim and uncertain, there was an occasional flicker of light down in the valley, caused by a gust of the cold fall wind blowing the crust of ashes from the few embers that marked the spot where supper had been cooked a few hours before.

At such times the sentinel drew his shoulders nearer together, and eyed the glowing coals listlessly, but as often shrunk back again into the darkness, casting a quick, apprehensive glance around him, as though dreading to behold some terrible, blood-curdling spectacle.

Immediately after one of these involuntary movements, the sentinel crouched down, convulsively grasping his rifle, his face turned upward, his burning eyes striving to pierce the gloom that shrouded the north wall of rocks, from which direction had come the suspicious sounds that startled him.

At that moment the moon shone out through a small opening in the clouds, casting one bright ray of light upon the cliff beyond, not unlike the reflection that streams from the bull's-eye of a dark-lantern.

A low, gasping cry parted the lips of the sentinel, and with his superstitious fears doubly strengthened, he stood as though petrified, glaring up at a strange vision.

The head and shoulders of a woman—her face white and bloodless, her eyes widely distended and turned upward, while her long hair streamed over her person, waving in the night-breeze, as, with uplifted hands, she appeared to be invoking some unseen spirit.

This strange vision appeared to be floating high in the air, and as those wild, mournful orbs turned toward him, the sentinel shrunk and shuddered in every muscle, closing his eyes in dumb horror as the phantom extended one hand toward him, some weapon glittering in her grasp.

A dull, muffled explosion, and the sentinel fell heavily at full length, not a sound escaping his lips.

A long-drawn, wailing cry from the rocks above, and then the weird picture was blotted out as the dense clouds swept once more athwart the face of the moon.

Like an echo came a shriek of terror or remorse from the valley, and as the sleeping party sprang to their feet, alarmed and confused, but grasping their weapons like men who were used to carrying their lives in their hands, and rushing to a common center the better to repulse the anticipated assault, a man rushed forward and dropped in a heap at the foot of the chief, Panther Paul, moaning and muttering incoherently like one who has experienced some terrible shock.

Panther Paul stooped and passed his hand swiftly across the face of the man crouching at his feet, then said:

"Handsome Hal—was it you that screamed? Where is Bradford? What has happened? Be a man!"

A curse, fierce yet denoting no small degree of fear, now came from one of the party, followed by the words:

"Sure Death! Bradford has been killed!"

At that moment the moon again burst through a rift in the clouds, filling the valley with a light clear and mellow, falling upon the body of the sentinel who had fallen before the quick gesture of the phantom on the cliff, revealing a ghastly, soul-sickening sight.

The man was dead. His skull was shattered in a horrible manner, the entire crown being missing!

His late comrades shrunk back, their teeth chattering, their eyes roving swiftly around them as though apprehensive of meeting some still more frightful object.

Even Panther Paul, whose reckless daring had long since passed into a proverb, fell hastily away from that gruesome spectacle, but one hand was firmly clasped around the arm of the man whom he had called Handsome Hal, and he dragged the trembling creature with him unresistingly.

Back into the deepest shade cast by the overhanging cliff, leaving the luckless victim of a terrible enemy lying in his blood.

"Tell me what you saw!" muttered Panther Paul, fiercely, giving his almost stupefied captive an impatient shake. "You and Bradford were alone on guard. He is dead, while you are living. Tell me—who killed him, and how? Tell your story straight, for if I catch you tripping, salt won't save you!"

"The dead have come to life! I saw her—my wife!"

The words fell from the lips of Handsome Hal, not in response to the question asked by Panther Paul, but like one who is ignorant of the sounds his tongue is forming.

Panther Paul shifted his grasp to the man's throat, and giving him a significant gripe, repeated his queries.

Handsome Hal made no effort to shake off that fierce clutch, but the action appeared to restore his senses in a great measure, and he gave a hasty explanation.

He had been faithfully keeping his ward, when a low cry as of alarm from his fellow-sentinel startled him, and following the glance of the latter, he beheld the strange vision in the air far above them. He saw it—whether man, woman or spirit—level a weapon at Bradford, heard the dull, muffled explosion. Then the moonlight faded away, and he could see no more.

"Seven men, and all killed in the same manner!" muttered Panther Paul, speaking as much to himself as addressing his companions. "Not one of them has been avenged—and why? Because we have been fools, blinded by our superstition!" he added fiercely, turning upon Handsome Hal.

"We have laid the crime at the door of a spirit—of a demon that bears our band an especial ill-will. But I begin to realize the mistake we made, and by all the fiends in tartarus! Handsome Hal, unless you can clear away the doubts in my mind, you had far better never have been born!"

"I don't understand you," slowly uttered the other.

"Six men have been murdered, besides Bradford, all in the same manner. Never once have we caught sight of the assassin, or been able to find any trail near by, save the footprints left by ourselves. For these reasons, the boys jumped to the conclusion that it was some bodiless demon that committed the deeds. Even I was misled for a time, but now I believe that our cunning enemy is as mortal as you are—that he lives and eats with us, watching his chances to work his devilish plans."

"And you think I am that secret enemy?"

"I did not suspect you above any of the rest, until to-night. But you and Bradford were the only two of our party awake. Had any of the other boys approached him, you must have noticed them."

"I saw the—the phantom in the air level a weapon at Bradford," slowly replied Handsome Hal.

"So you say. If daylight shows us any trail up there on the top of the cliff, then we will believe your story, but if not—then you should die, were you my own brother!"

A few words of explanation may not come amiss.

Panther Paul—by which name alone he was known to friend or enemy—was chief of a band of prairie pirates and outlaws, who infested the overland California trail, robbing and slaying, now as Indians, now in their own proper person, and occasionally making raids upon the scattered settlements, leaving death and desolation wherever they passed.

For several months past, a secret and terrible enemy had haunted their footsteps, picking them off one after another, leaving no trace behind him or it by which the dread mystery might be solved.

A superstitious terror grew in their hearts, and for fear lest his band should be forever broken up by these fears, Panther Paul led them deep into the heart of the foothills, intending there to pass the coming winter, hoping thus to elude the scourge of death—Sure Death, as the members of the band had already termed the mysterious marksman.

But now, just as they were beginning to hope that their plans were to be rewarded with suc-

cess, the terrible being again paid them a visit, laying low in death one of the best and most trusted men in the band.

"The dead leave no trail," muttered Handsome Hal, in a low, unnatural voice. "If my life depends upon that, then I am a dead man. But it don't matter much. That vision was a summons to me. My wife is waiting—"

"I thought you were single?" interposed Panther Paul.

"I am. My wife is dead—murdered—I killed her!"

Despite his steel nerves, Panther Paul involuntarily shrunk away from Handsome Hal, so fierce and bitter were his tones as he uttered these words.

As though he felt that he had already said too much, Handsome Hal relapsed into sullen silence, seemingly unconscious of the fact that Panther Paul, though not laying hands or bonds upon him, was still holding him prisoner to await the revelations of the coming day-dawn.

Not another one of the outlaws had overheard the words of their chief, else his sudden suspicions might have given them some relief from their superstitious terrors. As it was, they huddled close together under the densest cover, fearful with each moment that the mysterious Sure Death would claim another victim.

The remainder of the night dragged away heavily and wearily, but no further alarm occurred, and when the cliff beyond was outlined with sufficient distinctness, Handsome Hal, in obedience to the command of Panther Paul, pointed out the exact point where the strange vision of the past night must have stood, providing it was composed of living flesh and blood.

The chief selected two of his best, keenest trackers, and gave them their instructions in a few sharp words.

They moved off briskly enough to put his orders into execution, not daring to show the reluctance they really felt, for Panther Paul was an autocrat in a small way, and admitted no delay where he commanded haste.

Handsome Hal watched their movements with poorly concealed anxiety, for he knew that his life depended on the result, and during that dreary waiting for day, he had become himself again, and now felt that life was sweet.

The gray light fell upon his face with sufficient clearness to show that his fancy name had been bestowed upon him in mockery. Whatever he might have been in days gone by, it would be hard to find a more hideous face than that which was so eagerly upturned toward the two men who were rapidly moving to the spot where the vision of the past night had been seen.

A broad scar, as from a saber cut, crossed his face diagonally, while the skin upon either side had been burned and scorched in a terrible manner, twisting and distorting his features most grotesquely.

With such a face, most men would have considered life too great a burden to be willingly borne.

A sharp, clear cry came from one of the men on the cliff, as he waved his hand in a significant manner.

"I ask your pardon, mate," said Panther Paul, with a complete change of manner from suspicious doubt to open cordiality. "The boys have found a trail—and it must be that of Sure Death!"

"A woman's track you will find it," said Handsome Hal, the shadow deepening upon his brow. "I almost wish they had not succeeded—"

"Then you would have been a dead man before the sun rose!" laughed Panther Paul, with a hard expression on his hard face.

Turning, he shouted to the men above to follow the trail, then bade those beside him to make haste and prepare their horses for the road.

"The person that made yonder trail, murdered Bradford, and he bears the sign manual of Sure Death. The devil is weary of playing against us, and before the sun goes down, we will have avenged our comrades!"

There was no dissenting voice, even if the outlaws did not feel quite so confident of success, and in ten minutes more the entire party were mounted and riding up a steep trail out of the valley.

"It's either a woman or a boy," said one of the trailers, as Panther Paul rode up. "It rode a horse nearly up to the ridge, then stole forward on foot. Yer's whar it rid away ag'in. No spirit or ghost in this work!"

Still more confident of success, Panther Paul rode along behind the experienced scouts, who

picked up the trail with an ease and celerity that would have amazed the uninitiated.

They had not followed the trail for more than a mile, when Panther Paul uttered a sharp cry of exultation, and pointed ahead to where a horse and rider appeared around a point of rocks, headed directly toward them.

"Sighted at last!" he cried with ferocious exultation, his eyes glowing with a venomous light, his white teeth flashing beneath his jetty mustache. "Sure Death—devil or what not, this day shall witness a bitter retribution for the seven good men so foully assassinated!"

The discovery was apparently simultaneous, for the stranger pausing for a moment to gaze at the party from beneath his palm, raised to shield his eyes from the red sun, abruptly wheeled his horse and dashed around the cover from whence he had but the instant before emerged.

Handsome Hal appeared a little confused, for he had expected to behold a woman in the saddle, but if woman it was, the attitude and garments were those of a man.

Could it be that they had chanced upon another inhabitant of that lone waste? Surely the vision of the past night wore the long hair of a woman?

But he made no audible mention of his doubts. Panther Paul had taken for granted that this was the being who had fired the shot that laid his comrade low in death, and was now riding at breakneck speed toward the point of rocks, thirsting for vengeance.

Close behind him galloped his men, ever ready to follow where their chief led.

Thundering around the point of rocks, Panther Paul gave vent to a wild shout of vindictive triumph as he caught sight of the black horse and rider, and knew that they had been brought nearer even in that brief space of time.

"Spur and spare not!" he cried. "Kill your horses, but take that fellow prisoner, and you need never again lose sleep through fear of Sure Death!"

This would have been an unlucky speech for his hopes, had Panther Paul not bestrode the best horse in the party.

The Mystic Marksman was still a source of superstitious horror, and with the belief that he rode before them in the guise of yonder fugitives, not the bravest fellow among them all would have dared to take the lead in chase.

One backward glance by the rider of the black horse, then, as though realizing that life was at stake, he plied the spur, and the breakneck chase was fairly begun.

Straight ahead, across country that would have caused the cheeks of an Irish fox-hunter to turn pale—leaping over rifts and narrow chasms; over boulders and clumps of stunted shrubbery; dodging around huge masses of rock that lay here and there, as though cast in place by some evil power or monstrous giant; taking the shortest route that would lead to the far distant plains.

Panther Paul laughed aloud as he recklessly followed the bold lead thus given. He seemed to divine the reason why the fugitive was taking such a difficult course, but if the black steed showed wondrous power in the mad leaps it was forced to take, and the rider a rare skill as an equestrian, he knew that he and his were rough-riders with few equals and no superiors.

The old, gaunt, grizzled sinner who had first found the trail upon the cliff, echoed back the wild mirth of his chief, and with a touch of his spur, he rode a little nearer Panther Paul, speaking loudly to rise above the clattering of iron-shod hoofs.

"Tell the boys to scatter out in a long line, so that critter can't double on hisself, an' ef he ain't the devil, we'll have him foul inside o' a hour. Thar's a big deep canyon that crosses the hills, straight ahead. He can't git down, 'less he tumbles, nur git across, 'less he's got the wings of a turkey buzzard hid under thim 'ar clothes."

Without pausing to ask any questions or further explanation, Panther Paul gave the desired order, bidding his men gradually deploy into line, by that means forcing the fugitive to hold on his present course, or else bring him within reach of the flankers on one or the other wing.

He knew that old Dan Darby was thoroughly familiar with the present neighborhood. It had been his skill that led them thus far. And he knew, too, that the fellow was true as steel to his interests, that he loved him as a father loves a favorite son.

"The critter is a man, no better than the rest o' us!" added the veteran, with a grim chuckle, as the mad chase swept on with unabated vigor. "Ef the devil we've alays thought, he'd smell the trap ahead, an' turn to

right or left. A short hafe hour more and he's our meat, sure!"

"It may be a mistake—it was a woman I saw on the cliff last night," said Handsome Hal, who was now riding to the left hand of Panther Paul.

"The boss-trail is the same," shortly uttered Darby.

"We can take him or her alive, if the way is barred. It would be horrible to shoot down a woman by mistake."

"Alive it is, but not on that account. Man or woman there are seven good lives to pay for—and paid for they shall be, even though I have to out-Indian the Indians themselves in inventing diabolical tortures!" cried Panther Paul, his strong teeth grinding together in fury.

These remarks were widely separated, uttered only when a bit of ground more open and level than usual was being crossed, but after that fierce speech, no more was said by the central trio of pursuers.

The fugitive could not help noticing the startling tactics followed by the pursuers, and urged the black horse on with both voice and spur, riding straight as an arrow flight, overtopping obstacles that no rider would have faced in cold blood, either utterly devoid of fear, or else rendered desperate by the knowledge that death pursued.

At each backward glance, Panther Paul yelled sharply, his usually handsome face that of a veritable demon.

In silence Handsome Hal sped on, a hungry look in his eyes, and each time that white face was lighted up by the red rays of the morning sun, he leaned far forward, striving to solve the terrible doubts that assailed him—to learn if this could possibly be the being whom he believed dead for years and years.

"The game is ourn now!" exultantly uttered Dan Darby. "The pizen critter can't git out o' the trap 'thout ridin' in the teeth o' our weepens. The canyon lies afore it, and right yere it makes a bow like the new moon."

"He may ride down the rocks if we press him too close," suggested Handsome Hal, nervously.

Panther Paul paid heed to both suggestions, and called aloud to the men riding upon either hand, bidding them pass his instructions along to those more distant, the dozen men forming a long, irregular line that covered several hundred yards.

The fugitive was to be taken alive at all hazards. In case he endeavored to break through their line and escape thus, they were to shoot down the black horse and close swiftly in upon the rider.

These instructions delivered, and placing implicit confidence in the knowledge of Dan Darby, Panther Paul reined his horse down to a more moderate gait, laughing shrilly as he saw the fugitive urging his horse on to renewed efforts, no doubt believing the enemy was failing.

Such was in reality the case, but this newborn hope was fated to be short-lived.

Ten minutes later, with a despairing cry of horror, the fugitive drew rein so forcibly that the black steed fell back upon its haunches, but a scant two lengths from the canyon, a fall down which meant certain death on the ragged rocks near two hundred feet below.

A wild, exultant yell came from the outlaws, and for one instant the fugitive shrunk and quivered as though under the influence of mortal fear; but only for that brief space.

Then the black horse was wheeled around, and the enemy faced with the desperation born of utter hopelessness.

A brace of revolvers were drawn and cocked, the bridle reins hung loose upon the horse's neck. Then, with a clear, shrill shout of defiance, the once fugitive charged swiftly down upon the astonished outlaws.

CHAPTER II.

A DESPERATE LEAP FOR LIFE.

At the very moment when Panther Paul first gave the order for his men to spread out in line, the better to insure the capture of the fugitive, whom he firmly believed was none other than the mysterious Sure Death in person, the keen eyes of a young man caught sight of the distant chase, and quickly called the attention of his comrade to it.

"Tain't nobody we know, nor that we want to know, nuther, I don't reckon," muttered that companion, whom some of our readers may recognize under the name of Zephaniah Hardy, or "Hardy Zeph." "Thar's deviltry afoot yonder!"

"They are heading straight for us. Better swing to the left and let them pass," replied Dainty Lance.

"It's them critters that'll do the turnin' off, ef they know anythin' of the lay o' the ground afore 'em," said Zeph, coolly. "An' ef they don't, they can't come no closer than the ditch over yonder."

A few rapid paces forward carried them to where they could note the long, deep chasm, the further side being several feet the highest, and Dainty Lance felt that his comrade was right in affirming that the chase might come thus far, but no further.

"Reckon we'll take a 'served seat here 'mong the dornicks, an' watch the fun. May save us some trouble by findin' out who them hard ridin' critters be."

Launcelot Daintree made no objection to this suggestion, for his interest was strongly excited in the wild race that was so rapidly approaching over a truly break-neck course. But neither he nor Zeph had the slightest idea of mixing themselves up with the affair, for the bitter lesson read to them in Missouri had not yet been forgotten.

After the annihilation of the band of bank-robbers, under Hammer Fair, and the sad death of Decoy Duck, the two lads—for even now they were both under eighteen years of age—made the best of the way out of the State, and feeling that a longer sojourn so near the scene of their enforced exploits as outlaws, would not be healthy, they tarried only long enough to procure a suitable outfit, then struck boldly out for the trapping grounds.

Here they had been for nearly two months, and warned by the increasing coolness of the weather that winter was rapidly approaching, they resolved to spend a week or two in killing and curing meat sufficient to carry them through the cold season.

The morning in question was the first of their hunt, and perhaps it was fortunate that thus far they had run across no game worthy a charge of powder and lead.

"A dozen critters chasin' one!" muttered Zeph, crouching down where two huge rocks nearly joined, leaving a natural loophole between at the height of a man's breast.

With an interest that grew breathless the two young trappers watched the chase, and Dainty Lance had opened his lips to utter a warning cry lest the fugitive should plunge headlong down the dizzy canyon unawares, when the black steed was wrenched to a standstill.

"He's only a boy!" muttered Dainty Lance, as he noted the white, beardless face that was visible beneath the broad-brimmed hat. "Danger or not, if he was once fairly on this side of the canyon, he shouldn't be killed without one hand being raised to help him."

"A boy, mebbe, but gritty," tersely observed Hardy Zeph.

As he spoke, the rider of the black steed wheeled his animal and thundered straight back at the center of the line, where rode Panther Paul, Handsome Hal and Dan Darby.

The outlaws were clearly taken by surprise, and with but few exceptions, they felt a sudden return of the old superstitious dread with which the very idea of Sure Death had been associated from the first.

Even Panther Paul involuntarily drew rein as the fugitive turned to bay, but this indecision lasted only for a moment.

"Close in on him and kill the horse!" he shouted, so clear and loud that our young friends in ambush understood his commands. "Take him alive to suffer torture for the foul murders he has committed!"

It seemed as though these stern words had cowed the desperate fugitive, for at that moment he wheeled his horse once more, rapidly replacing his weapons and gathering up the bridle reins; but Hardy Zeph read his purpose more accurately.

"Pure grit, by thunder! he means to jump the kenyon!"

Such was indeed the fact! Instinct or reason told the fugitive that certain death awaited his capture by the fierce outlaws, and he preferred risking his neck in a bold attempt to escape by a leap across the chasm.

He had come upon it unexpectedly, and though the different height of the two walls made the space appear less than it really was, he knew that his mechanical pause would be fatal to the attempt, if made just then.

It was to gain ground in which to allow his noble horse to fully extend his stride, that the backward charge was made, and a clear, taunting laugh floated to the ears of Panther Paul

and his mates as the stranger wheeled and rode direct for the fearful leap.

Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph fairly held their breath as the black horse came thundering down, straight to its death, as it seemed to them, and it was with great difficulty that the former kept from leaping forward with a warning shout. He surely would have done so, but for the dread of precipitating the catastrophe he would avert, by causing the horse to lose his stride when thus startled.

Straight on, holding a firm rein, sitting erect and graceful as though at ordinary exercise instead of facing a leap where failure meant certain death—a leap that might well have caused the boldest horseman to flinch without detriment to his manhood—straight on rode the boy-like adventurer, looking a veritable hero.

Straight on at a rapid pace—straight on, until so close to the edge of the canyon that death itself could not have checked the black horse in time to avert the leap or fall—then the boyish rider plunged spurs rowel deep into the flanks of his horse uttering a sharp, encouraging cry, at the same time lifting the animal with a steady strain upon the reins.

Into the air like a winged bird rose the noble creature, shooting across the dizzy chasm with a loud snort of mingled fear and defiance, clearing the canyon with several feet to spare, amid the excited shouts which burst from the lips of the ambushed lads, who forgot their own reasons for secrecy in their admiration of the daring exploit.

But they exulted prematurely.

The noble animal alighted upon a loose stone, which gave way beneath its weight, causing it to stumble and plunge headlong, falling upon its head with a force that broke its neck, the rider being hurled several yards further on, into a clump of stunted bushes that partially broke his fall.

As he witnessed this unlucky termination to a splendid exploit, Dainty Lance arose from cover and hastened to the rescue of the fallen rider, unheeding the angry yells with which the outlaws greeted his unexpected appearance.

Panther Paul had been one of the first to recover from the surprise occasioned by the unexpected movements of their intended victim, and pressed forward in hot pursuit, only drawing rein when nearly at the edge of the chasm.

Splendidly mounted, and an utterly fearless rider, he would have imitated the desperate leap, had not that fatal stumble rendered it unnecessary. Still to make all things sure, he leveled his revolver and discharged a hasty shot at the luckless rider—hasty, because just at that moment Dainty Lance broke cover and darted toward the motionless figure.

"Pull trigger agin, an' down goes your meat house!" cried Hardy Zeph in a sharp, fierce tone, adding cunningly: "Kiver every durned one, boys, an' cut loose when I tell ye!"

Dainty Lance saw the lead scatter the pebbles a little to one side of the prostrate figure, but he knew that the next shot might be better aimed, and snatching up the slight form in his arms, he dropped down behind the nearest cover—a pile of stones balanced one upon another, only a few feet away.

One quick glance showed him the outlaws rapidly falling back from the canyon, or else dismounting and squatting behind the plentiful cover afforded by the boulders, their movements quickened by the sharp commands which Hardy Zeph was delivering to his imaginary army.

Thus satisfied that there was no immediate danger to be apprehended, Dainty Lance turned his attention toward the stranger, who lay unconscious in his arms.

At the first glance his first impression was confirmed, but a closer look showed him that that pale, thin, careworn and lined face was not that of a boy. And then, as the broad-brimmed felt hat fell from his head, revealing a mass of long, silky hair, deep brown, though threaded here and there with silver, he started back with a wondering cry.

The supposed boy was a woman!

Her eyes opened at his cry and start; eyes large, bright, with the mournful, hunted look in them that one may note in the orbs of a death-stricken deer.

"You are safe from the men who pursued you, if you only keep close under this cover," said Dainty Lance, hurriedly, for he fancied he saw the same expression in those eyes that had met his gaze on that night when Decoy Duck yielded up her young life to preserve his liberty. "We will defend you with our lives, if needs be."

Afraid to linger longer, he scarcely knew why, Dainty Lance, keeping covered as well as

possible, hastened to rejoin Hardy Zeph, to whom he made known his truly startling discovery.

The brow of the young trapper clouded, but Dainty Lance met his keen gaze unflinchingly, smiling as he said:

"She is old enough to be our mother, Zeph. But that don't lessen our responsibility. Being a woman, we must defend her life against those scoundrels."

"Mebbe she's thar wife," suggested Zeph, somewhat hazily.

At that moment Panther Paul, holding a white rag on the end of a stick, arose from his cover and shouted:

"Who are you that show such readiness to come between a foul assassin and those who have sworn to execute stern justice on the criminal?"

"We are men who have been taught it was a sacred duty to defend a woman in peril or distress," boldly returned Dainty Lance, arising and showing himself.

"A woman! I mean the man you picked up yonder—the one who leaped this canyon on that black horse."

Dainty Lance realized the mistake he had made, but it was now too late to follow any other course.

"The one you call a man is a woman, and unless she is willing to voluntarily surrender herself into your hands, you must take her the best way you can."

"An' afore you do that, you've got to crawl over jest a baker's dozen o' us, not countin' in the she-male!" cried Hardy Zeph, with more energy than truth.

"Man or woman, that person has murdered seven of my best men, at different times, and as we have vowed solemn vengeance upon her head, so we mean to execute it, though an army stands in the way!" fiercely cried Panther Paul, shaking his clenched fist threateningly.

The next moment, as though suddenly remembering that some one among that "baker's dozen" might not fancy this manner of address, and make an unanswerable argument in the shape of a rifle ball, the outlaw chief dropped down behind the nearest cover, which happened to be occupied by old Dan Darby as well.

On the look-out for treachery, both Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph kept closely covered, their weapons ready for use, in case of need, but reluctant to strike the first blow.

Those of the outlaws who had at first ridden out of range, now left their horses and crawled toward the spot where their friends and chief lay.

"It's a pesky quar' game!" muttered Zeph, in a tone not entirely free from disgust. "One's afeared an' t'other dassent!"

Worse definition of the situation might have been given.

Panther Paul believed that a force at least equal to his own was lying hidden among the rocks beyond the canyon, any attempt to cross which in their teeth, would be rank folly.

On the other hand, though plenty of cover was scattered around them, the young trappers knew that they could not retreat without exposing their numerical weakness.

"A dead lock, sure enough!" said Dainty Lance, taking in the whole situation. "Well, we can lay low as we are until night, then beat a retreat under cover of darkness."

This was not an agreeable prospect, but the youngsters were not left long to ponder upon it.

Panther Paul held a hasty consultation with Dan Darby and Handsome Hal, though he overruled their advice, and the conclusion he arrived at was quickly and silently passed along from man to man.

Once more elevating his white flag, he waved it to and fro until Dainty Lance demanded his desires, then he arose and spoke in a moderate, placable tone:

"As I told you before, the person you are shielding, has justly forfeited his or her life. Our love of justice is strong, but we prefer an amicable solution rather than an appeal to arms, if it be possible.

"On what terms will you surrender that assassin?"

"Only of her own free will," was the prompt reply.

Hot words sprung to the lips of the fiery tempered outlaw, but by a giant effort he choked them back, and his voice was low and even as he resumed:

"You will be sorry for this, when you come to know the criminal whom you are defending, better than you do now. But there is no need of our fighting over it. If you will pledge your

honor not to take advantage of the movement, I will draw off my men peaceably."

This proposition took the young trappers greatly by surprise, and they hesitated for a moment before replying.

"There's some trick hidden beneath his smooth speech!" muttered Dainty Lance, a little uneasily.

"Mebbe not," replied Zeph, in the same guarded tone. "I reckon he believes what I said—that we kin match him man fer man—an' don't like the idea of a fa'r, stan-up fight fer the woman-critter. Ruther play cunnin' an' watch his chances fer to git in a lick when she's alone."

"They will ride up or down the canyon until they find a crossing-place. Then it won't be long before they find out just how many we are, and they'll hunt us down."

"That p'int was settled when you fust showed yourself an' tuck the part o' the stranger. But we kin git to the dug-out afore them, an' it ain't no dozen men that kin trouble us much in thar."

"Come, is it peace or war between us?" cried Panther Paul, a little impatiently.

"Don't be in such a hurry, friend," coolly replied Dainty Lance. "We are all free and equal, here, and so I had to learn the opinion of my comrades."

"And their decision?"

"Is favorable to your wishes. If you are acting squarely yourself, you need fear no interruption from us. Gather up your horses, and good luck go with you!"

Panther Paul uttered a sharp cry that brought his own horse, a noble creature, full of fire and spirits, to his side, but he made no move toward mounting while his men were engaged in securing their animals.

This did not consume much time, and when all were mounted, the outlaw chief vaulted into the saddle, bowed low toward the rocks where the young trappers lay hidden, then rode slowly away from the canyon.

But he had no intention of abandoning the game so easily, and when some fifty yards away from the chasm, he uttered a clear shout, wheeled his horse to the left and thundered swiftly down toward the barrier.

Dan Darby, equally well mounted, turned to the right and also charged, the two reckless riders being some fifty yards apart, but timing their movements so admirably that both horses reached the canyon at the same moment, rising into the air and taking the desperate leap!

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERIOUS DEATH-SHOT.

This sudden change of base took both Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph completely by surprise, and the latter was recocking his rifle, his keen eyes riveted upon Panther Paul, when a hasty yet calm word from his comrade checked him.

"There are only two of them coming. Let them fairly cross over before we begin to burn powder."

Hardy Zeph at once recognized the true wisdom of this speech, and even in that moment of intense excitement, he felt a hot glow of shame arising to his temples, at the fact of his having given occasion for such a warning.

The chasm was about thirty feet in breadth, both take-off and alighting points being composed of nearly solid rock, strewn over with a slight coating of sand, with here and there a loose stone or pebble.

It was not every horse and rider that could take such a leap, where failure meant almost certain death, but Panther Paul and the grizzled old scout never flinched as they reached the verge of the canyon, lifting their snorting animals to the death-leap with rein and spur.

At almost the same instant the two horses made the desperate leap, but fate appeared to take pleasure in baffling the outlaw chief in this adventure.

In making its last forward stride, the horse bestrode by Panther Paul was thrown off its balance by the slipping of one hind hoof.

The cunning rider knew in an instant that something was wrong, and instinctively loosened his feet in the stirrups, though making no attempt to check his animal.

The space was too short for that. A cannon ball or a lightning stroke could not have stopped the horse instantaneously; its momentum would inevitably have carried both itself and rider over the verge, down upon the rocks below.

The sagacious animal seemed to know that that one false step was fatal, and a wild, unearthly scream burst from its mighty lungs as it rose into the air, hovering for a moment above the ragged rocks that were fated to drink its life-blood and grind its bones into a shapeless mass.

For a single breath the magnificent creature seemed poised like some strange bird upon the wing, then its head and fore legs were shot out to their fullest extent—but all in vain.

Instead of fairly clearing the chasm, the doomed creature struck upon the further edge, its hind-quarters hanging down, almost paralyzed by the terrible force with which its body struck the rock.

Even if wholly uninjured, the creature could never have succeeded in gaining the level, and each instant it sunk lower, though desperately struggling.

Panther Paul saw this, and with swift dexterity he extricated his feet from the stirrups, drew them up until they found a support in the saddle seat, intending to leap from thence to the solid ground above and beyond.

Rapid as were his actions, they consumed too much time for perfect success.

With a scream that was blood-curdling in its intensity of fear, the noble horse slipped back over the escarpment before Panther Paul could secure a fair foothold in the saddle. Yet even then his catlike activity would have saved him, had not one foot come in contact with the head of the horse, just then thrown violently backward.

The outlaw chief fell heavily with his breast against the rock, momentarily driving the breath out of his body, while his ill-fated horse plunged swiftly down the canyon, turning end over end, crashing upon the rocks far below, a victim to its master's headstrong passions.

For a moment or two it seemed as though Panther Paul was fated to meet the same end, for the force of his fall had robbed him of his power for the time being, and he slowly but surely slipped back over the dizzy height. But then, just in time to check his fall, his right hand closed upon the stem of a slender bush that had found root in a small crevice where dirt and dust had settled; a frail support, but one that afforded him a respite from death.

All this occurred almost instantaneously, and when Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph, who naturally watched the more prominent of the two dare-devils, saw Panther Paul sink down to death, as they then supposed, they turned toward the other side where Dan Darby had ridden.

That worthy was rewarded with better success than his superior, so far as crossing the canyon in safety was concerned, his horse leaping true and alighting fairly, though its hoofs slipped upon the level rock, carrying it forward a few yards in a confused scramble to keep its footing. The old man clung to his saddle as though he was glued there, but the desperate struggle of his horse kept him fully occupied during the few moments consumed by the scene in which Panther Paul was so intimately concerned.

The choice he had made carried him nearly abreast the cover behind which Dainty Lance had left the strange woman, and the first animate object that greeted his eyes when he had fairly recovered from the leap, was that same person, whom he confidently believed was Sure Death, rising up from behind the rock, weapon in hand.

With a swift dexterity, born of long experience in equal emergencies, Dan Darby snatched a revolver from his belt and cocked it, but that was all.

A strange, muffled report, precisely similar to that which had heralded the death of Bradford in the lonely glen a few hours previously, now startled the spectators.

There was no flash, no smoke visible; nothing but that smothered explosion.

Yet Dan Darby flung up his arms, the revolver dropping from his hand and exploding upon the rock; his body fell over backward, the red sunlight shining full upon his shattered skull, while blood and brains pattered over the rocks like a misty rain!

His horse made one terrified leap forward, hurling the body from the saddle, then stood still and trembling, as though under the same superstitious fears that now seized upon the outlaws like an epidemic.

With wild yells of horror and fear, the majority of them put spurs to their horses and dashed away at full speed, while the others tumbled rather than leaped to the ground in order to shield themselves behind some bullet-proof cover.

At the instant when Dan Darby met his strange death, Dainty Lance was covering him with his rifle, pausing only to make sure of his aim, and their relative positions brought the strange woman within his range of vision.

He saw her stagger back, dropping her re-

volver and clasping her hand over her eyes, while a choking cry that seemed one of horror, burst from her lips. Then, as though stricken a deadly blow, she fell to the ground.

"Keep me covered," he said to Hardy Zeph, and ran swiftly across to the spot, stooping over the woman.

She lay like one dead, but he could discover no traces of a fresh wound on her person.

"It was enough to make any woman faint!" he muttered, glancing toward the spot where Dan Darby lay, a ghastly, gruesome sight. "And yet—she must have killed him!"

Dainty Lance was given no time to investigate the mysterious death, for an agitated cry came from the further side of the canyon, and glancing in that direction he saw a man standing erect, then leap forward with swift strides, heading straight for the chasm, as though he meant to dare the frightful leap.

Hardy Zeph, not a little startled by this enigmatical conduct, leveled his rifle and fired, but his aim was foiled by one of those enormous bounds, and the lead whistled harmlessly on to spend its force upon the rocks far beyond.

Dainty Lance uttered a warning cry to his friend, but too late to arrest the shot, and hurriedly retraced his steps, just in time to catch Zeph's arm and prevent his opening fire with his revolver.

"Don't shoot—see! he is unarmed—the poor devil is crazed by the loss of his master!"

This surmise was probably the correct one, for the man paused on the very brink, his empty hands uplifted, crying:

"Save him—save his life, and I will be your dog—your slave! Save him if ye be men!"

It was Handsome Hal, and upon his distorted countenance was written a terrible emotion that words are powerless to paint.

To explain his agitation, a brief retrogression is necessary.

As already stated, in falling Paul grasped a small, imperfectly-rooted bush, by which he now hung suspended above the rocks that were crimsoned with the life-blood of his horse, hundreds of feet below.

His face was upturned, his teeth tight clenched to keep back the scream of horror that struggled strongly to pass the barrier, his protruding eyes riveted upon the frail hold that was slowly but surely being destroyed by his heavy weight.

He hung only by one hand, fearing to hasten the catastrophe should he struggle to raise his other arm.

He had felt in vain for some support to his feet.

At that point the rock was as smooth and perpendicular as the wall of a room. A cat could not have found foothold there, much less a man.

He saw the frail roots yielding one by one beneath the heavy strain brought upon them. He saw the bush bending more and more, and felt that he was sinking down still nearer to a frightful death—fitting end for the wild and blood-stained life he had led for years!

Bit by bit the dirt and gravel from around the bush began to patter down upon his face, each touch seeming like the relentless tapping of the skeleton finger of death, setting its seal upon his brow—and unable longer to stifle the audible utterance of the fears that had seized him, Panther Paul uttered a frightful screech that bade fair to prove his death-yell.

The bush yielded, and the outlaw shot downward.

Strangely interested by the strong agitation displayed by Handsome Hal, Dainty Lance had hastened forward in response to his wild appeal, though until that moment he had believed Panther Paul dead beyond a doubt, ignorant that he hung suspended as described.

Hardy Zeph also stepped forward, but his eyes were jealously roving over the rocks beyond, where he knew that several of the outlaws lay hidden, his pistol in readiness to foil by death any attempt at treachery.

But none such were attempted.

The three men who, besides Handsome Hal, were all that had not fled at the terrible and mysterious death of old Dan Darby, lay close behind cover, trembling with superstitious fear, while Handsome Hal had eyes and thoughts only for Panther Paul, suspended in mid-air.

Dainty Lance had barely time to catch one glimpse of that fear-lined, upturned face, ere the bush gave way, and unwilling to look upon the death even of a bitter enemy, he covered his eyes with his hands and averted his head, even while instinctively listening for the horrible thud which he knew must follow the contact with the rocks below of the outlaw's body.

But that sound did not come as expected. Instead, a piercing cry from the lips of Handsome Hal.

"He lives! he lives yet! Save him—oh—"

Overcome by some terrible emotion, the disfigured outlaw staggered, his right hand grasping at his throat as though he was suffocating, and Dainty Lance uncovered his eyes to witness Handsome Hal fall to the ground like a dead man!

The outlaws beyond cowered still closer behind their cover, for, though they had heard no subdued explosion such as had announced the death of Dan Darby, they believed Handsome Hal had fallen another victim to this unknown and mysterious enemy.

But such was not the case. Handsome Hal had been stricken down by joy, doubly intense from following utter despair—joy that Panther Paul was yet living, and might possibly be yet rescued from death.

His escape had been little short of a miracle.

Ten or a dozen feet below his lower extremities as he hung by the bush, a stout cedar shrub had found root in a crevice, its stem growing out a few inches from the face of the rock, then bending sharply to the right for several feet, before inclining upward.

In falling, the feet of Panther Paul had passed between the rock and this trunk, causing his head and body to topple over, and he now hung suspended from the knees above the dizzy depth.

He looked like a dead man. There was no stir or signs of life; but that was caused by the back of his head coming in violent contact with the rock wall when his downward career was so abruptly checked by the interposing cedar shrub.

Dainty Lance had just made this discovery when Handsome Hal recovered from his swoon, and once more begged them to rescue his master.

"He will soon die, hanging there—the blood is oozing from his nose and lips even now," he added, trembling with an agitation as strong as it was strange.

"It could be done, if we were alone," said Zeph, in answer to the inquiring glance of his companion. "But not the way things is. You, nur I nuther, hain't got but one life, an' we'd be pesky fools to throw it away in tryin' to help one o' them that has already played us dirt."

"He is a man—a fellow-being," urged Dainty Lance. "We cannot stand idle here and watch him die the death of a dog!"

"Let his mates help him, then," was the dogged response. "Two o' the gang jumped over. Let the rest try it. Mebbe thar'll be enough saved to git the king-pin out o' trouble."

Handsome Hal listened to this brief conversation with rapidly increasing anxiety. Then he cried:

"He will perish while you are talking! If you are true white men, save him ere it is too late!"

"An' while we're doin' it—while we're off our guard, an' onable to defend ourselves—then you pizen imps'll up an' salivate us. Not much!" growled Zeph.

"Save him, and if a hand is raised against you, I swear that I will kill the man that moves it, even were it my own brother!" uttered Handsome Hal, in a tone that even skeptical Zeph could not doubt was sincere.

"Make your men come out from under cover, then," decided Dainty Lance. "Disarm them and make them retire fifty yards from the spot where you deposit their weapons. Do this, and we will attempt to save your friend."

"It shall be done!" cried Handsome Hal, drawing a revolver, "or I'll kill the man that resists!"

CHAPTER IV.

PANTHER PAUL CHEATS GRIM DEATH.

HANDSOME HAL was in deadly earnest, and the young trappers felt that they could trust him implicitly—at least until Panther Paul was rescued from his perilous situation.

Even then, Dainty Lance could not help thinking that there must be some sterling qualities in this man, or his comrade would not be so powerfully affected by his danger.

He and Hardy Zeph both stood beside the chasm, with their weapons in readiness for instant use in case the emergency should arise, their heads and shoulders rising above the level of the opposite side, watching the movements of the disfigured outlaw with strong interest.

Handsome Hal did not lose a moment of time, plainly feeling that there was great and good cause for haste.

In a few, hurried words, he made known the perilous situation of Panther Paul, and told them the conditions on which the two strangers were willing to rescue him.

"If left there a few minutes longer, he must die. We cannot cross over to his aid. We must trust to them. We must fall in with their conditions. Disarm and stand out in full view—"

"Fer that bloody Sure Death to knock us over—not much! Our lives is wuth as much to us as the cap'n's is to him—"

The sentence was cut short after a fashion that told how fearfully in earnest Handsome Hal was.

With a motion quick as light, he raised his right hand and sent a bullet from his revolver crashing into the brain of the selfish speaker, then cried aloud in a sharp, menacing tone:

"Just so I'll treat you every one, if you dare hesitate another moment! What are your lives beside that of our chief and master? Up, I say! Drop your rifles—off with your belts! The man that hesitates shall die the death of a dog by my hand!"

There were only two of the outlaws left within earshot, and Handsome Hal had them each covered with a cocked revolver. Even under the most favorable circumstances, they would have thought twice about attacking the disgraced outlaw who, even among such a band, was accounted rather more devil than man; but now, with the death of their more stubborn comrade staring them in the face, the reputation earned by Handsome Hal overpowered their superstitious fears of Sure Death.

Cringing before him, they arose from cover and disarmed themselves.

"Send 'em along the edge o' the kenyon until they're out o' pistol range," cried Hardy Zeph as Handsome Hal turned his face toward him for further orders. "Tell 'em to stan' out thar in full sight, an' not to try to dodge away, or I'll tell the boys to scoop 'em in."

There was no need for Handsome Hal to repeat these words. The two outlaws were ready enough to obey, since it increased the distance between themselves and the cover behind which Sure Death, as they believed, was crouching on the look-out for another victim.

Handsome Hal watched them until they reached the point indicated, then approached the edge of the canyon, removing his weapons and casting them aside as he did so.

Pausing directly opposite the point where Panther Paul hung above a frightful death, he said, his voice trembling with the intensity of his emotion:

"I have kept my pledge—I pray you, be as good. Make haste—he may be dying even now! He must not die—"

"We'll do what we can," quickly replied Dainty Lance.

"An' while we're a-doin' of it, you want to mind your eye," added sturdy Zeph, in a tone of warning. "They's a dozen rifle bar'ls kiver-in' ye as ye stand, ready to blow you to never-come-back-ag'in at the fust crooked move."

"Don't talk—work!" almost snarled Handsome Hal, looking strangely like a human tiger as he crouched there above the canyon, his fingers working convulsively, his eyes aglow, his white teeth bared and grating together.

The young trappers were affected by the strong solicitude he felt for his master, too deeply to take offense at this blunt speech, and hastily made their preparations for rescuing Panther Paul from his aerial perch.

They found one lasso attached to the pommel of the saddle worn by the horse which the strange woman had leaped over the chasm, and observing another on the horse which had belonged to Dan Darby, Zeph quickly secured that also.

This last he tossed to Dainty Lance, saying:

"Drop the noose end o' that down to me when I call fer it. Hold the end o' this while I measure the right length."

Zeph approached the edge of the perpendicular wall above Panther Paul, dropping one end of the lasso over until it hung a trifle below the inanimate body, then, with the aid of Dainty Lance, he secured the other end to a heavy boulder some yards back from the canyon.

This done, he tied the loose end around his own body, close up under his armpits, then returned to the escarpment and holding on above the slack, cautiously thrust his feet over the edge of the wall.

Assisted by the support of Dainty Lance's hand, Zeph lowered himself until he could securely grasp the rope below where it rubbed against the rock, and in another moment he was

hanging alongside and a little below Panther Paul.

With breathless eagerness Handsome Hal watched these methodical movements, and when Hardy Zeph coolly thrust one hand into the bosom of the pendent outlaw, he leaned perilously far forward, his eyes almost starting from their sockets, his throat working convulsively in the efforts made to utter the question that would not shape itself into words.

Dainty Lance read this emotion aright, and himself put the question to Zeph: did the man still live?

"Yes, but his heart don't thump loud enough to skeer a skeeter off, ef it should settle onto him," was the quaint response.

Handsome Hal drew back, his head whirling, his vision blurred, for the moment almost unable to breathe.

"Make haste—we must save his life if we can," uttered Dainty Lance. "That man over yonder will die too, f he does, I verily believe!"

Hardy Zeph made what haste was consistent with prudence, passing the lasso lowered by Dainty Lance around the body of the outlaw, knotting it firmly, afraid lest the noose, if trusted alone, would squeeze out what flickering remnant of life yet lingered in Panther Paul.

When this was accomplished, Zeph drew himself up hand over hand, and soon stood upon the level once more.

"Ketch hold an' pull steady unless I tell ye to ease up," he said, drawing in the slack until the lasso was taut that held Panther Paul. "Not too fast, now."

It was a rather delicate piece of work, but the young trappers proved equal to the emergency.

Slowly the strain was increased, to guided by Hardy Zeph that the head and shoulders of Panther Paul gradually rose in a true line, thus avoiding any dangerous strain upon the joints of his knees, or suffering them to get twisted by the body swinging around sideways.

Handsome Hal watched the feat with painful interest, and gave vent to a cry of exultation as the body of his chief assumed a perpendicular position and his feet swung clear of the bush that had preserved him from death.

Despite his care, Hardy Zeph could not prevent the head and face of Panther Paul from receiving some awkward rubs against the face of the rock, but the notorious outlaw was at length drawn over the escarpment, limp and lifeless, more like a dead man than aught else.

But Dainty Lance could feel his heart distinctly throbbing, and declared as much to Handsome Hal.

Though ordinarily what most persons would consider a handsome man, Panther Paul presented a repulsive aspect now, his face purple and bloated, the veins greatly distended, while blood oozed from his mouth and nostrils.

One glance Dainty Lance took, then averted his eyes with a shudder.

"A pizen ugly critter—'pears like we made a mistake in ever haulin' him up from down thar," muttered Zeph, no whit more favorably impressed.

And could they have seen what the future was to bring forth, Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph would have vied with each other in being the first to hurl Panther Paul over the escarpment to the death from which they had rescued him.

"Restore him—if you have no liquor, catch my flask," cried Handsome Hal, as the comrades drew back from the body.

"We have done all we agreed to," said Dainty Lance, coldly. "There is nothing serious the matter with him: only a bruise on the back of his head where it came in contact with the rock. He will soon regain his senses without our aid."

"Tell me your names, that I may make known to him who it was that risked their lives to save his."

"The less you say about us, the better. We could not see him die like a dog, without lifting a hand in his behalf, but unless his face belies his nature, it would have been better for all honest men had we let him perish."

"Tell him this, if you must say any thing about us: that we are honest trappers, but that we will know how to take back the life we gave, if he ever gives us trouble."

Handsome Hal made no reply, and Zeph hastened to secure the horse which was still standing beside its dead master, while Dainty Lance passed over to where he left the strange woman lying in a swoon.

She had aroused from this, and though she made no attempt to escape at the young man's

approach, there was a wild, hunted look in her large eyes that struck him painfully.

There was more of the animal than human in them, and Dainty Lance hesitated, but only for a moment.

Even if a mad person, she was still a woman.

He spoke to her gently, and she arose without a word, though trembling in every limb, the hunted look deepening in her eyes.

He saw the revolver which had fallen from her grasp when she shrunk back in horror from the terrible death of Dan Darby, and as he picked it up, he mechanically looked into the cylinder as he turned it around between finger and thumb.

A wondering exclamation parted his lips, for he saw that every chamber was loaded! Nor did the weapon bear signs of having been discharged for several days at least.

Surely she had fired the fatal shot? And yet—

He turned to put the question point blank, but as he noted that wild look, he choked back the words. Now, if never before, the strange woman was undoubtedly insane!

At that moment Hardy Zeph approached with the horse, and Dainty Lance quickly schooled his features, resolved to keep the discovery to himself for the present, for he knew that his friend was very superstitious. "Better let him believe that the woman had fired the shot, that laid Dan Darby low, at least for the present."

"We don't want to run the resk o' bein' folered too soon," said Hardy Zeph, with a backward nod of his head to where lay Panther Paul, still unconscious. "That critter is pizen b'iled down. He'd foller us an' we'd hev to rub him out. Better tie him up to one o' them dornicks. It'll take two hours fer his padners to come around to set him free, an' by that time we'll be safe enough."

Dainty Lance realized the prudence of this advice, and bade Zeph put it into execution. He did not like the eager manner in which the madwoman eyed the horse, and feared to leave her alone for a moment.

Hardy Zeph lost no time in putting his idea into execution, binding Panther Paul with the lasso in an upright position to one of the large boulders, saying to Handsome Hal, by way of explanation:

"When he wakes up he'll be crazy as a bed-bug! Like enough the fust thing he'd do'd be to jump down the ditch. We'll leave him tied so he can't hurt himself, until you kin cross over an' tend to him."

Dainty Lance raised the frail form of the woman into the saddle, and with a last look backward at the motionless form of Panther Paul, the trio moved away from the scene of bloodshed and mystery.

Handsome Hal never once glanced after them, but crouched there on the edge of the canyon, watching Panther Paul with a painful intentness, paying no attention to his two comrades as they drew near.

When they saw the two trappers in company with the being whom they believed was the destroyer of their comrades, disappear among the broken rocks far away, they were relieved of their fears in a great measure, and so ventured back.

Handsome Hal made no reply when one of them suggested recalling their terrified companions, and taking silence for consent, the outlaws called aloud and made signals that were eventually answered by the approach of the fugitives.

At nearly the same time Panther Paul recovered his consciousness, and hearing the trampling of hoofs, stared across the canyon, for the moment confused and bewildered.

But then, as he glared around him, his eyes rested upon the dead body of Dan Darby, and the whole past returned.

He struggled to free himself, but in vain. The lasso would have held a grizzly bear, and Hardy Zeph had tied it firmly.

"Leap across and set me free!" he screamed, fairly foaming at the mouth.

In a tone that was singularly even and calm, when his recent agitation be remembered, Handsome Hal replied:

"There is not a single horse here that can take such a leap with any prospect of success. We can only ride up to the crossing, and come down on the other side."

Amid a volley of curses on their cowardliness, Panther Paul bade them hasten around, and the outlaws, feeling reassured by the departure of the dreaded Sure Death, set off up the canyon as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit.

Left alone with the mutilated body of his best and most trusted man, Dan Darby, Panther Paul passed through a truly frightful ordeal during that period of waiting.

The blow upon his head, added to blood that had pressed so long and fully upon his brain while hanging from the cedar tree, unsettled his mind for the time being, and as he struggled desperately with his bonds, he shouted wildly for Sure Death to stand forth and confront him, adding curses and blasphemy frightful enough to have called down the fire of heaven upon his head.

Yelling, screaming, raving—so loudly that his men heard him from afar, and with Handsome Hal leading, they rode at a breakneck speed to gain the spot.

Bold men though they were, when their superstition was not assailed, all of them shrunk back when they drew near to the spot where the insane chief was bound, and even Handsome Hal hesitated when Panther Paul, appearing to recognize him even in his madness, cried:

"Release me—cut this cursed rope! Sure Death is waiting for me—I must fight and kill him! Cut me loose!"

His hesitation was only momentary; then Handsome Hal advanced and severed the lasso with his knife.

Panther Paul made one step forward, then flung up his arms and fell heavily with a horrible grugling cry!

CHAPTER V.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

MEANWHILE, Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph, leading the confiscated horse on which sat the strange woman, were steadily making their way through the broken, rocky track, no longer thinking of the object which had drawn them thither, but intent only on reaching the curious building which served them as headquarters, without leaving too plain a trail behind them.

"We'd be foolish to waste the time necessary to thoroughly conceal our trail," said Dainty Lance in answer to Zeph. "If those men are determined to find us, they can do so without following our tracks. The lay of the ground will tell them where to look for men who are trapping, and once on the stream, they will find plenty of sign by which to line us home."

Hardy Zeph realized the force of this reasoning, but nevertheless he grumbled a little at thus violating all the rules and laws of trappercraft by leaving a plain and unbroken trail behind them, with a strong enemy at the further end, and managed to lengthen the journey a little by picking out the course affording the hardest, driest footing.

Dainty Lance made no comment. He was ill at ease.

Not that the prospect of personal peril troubled him greatly, though he was sorry that their hopes of a peaceful season had been broken thus early; it was the woman thus strangely thrown upon their hands that troubled him.

Beyond a doubt she was insane, temporarily at least, and like the vast majority of human beings, Dainty Lance felt an especial repugnance to being brought into close association with one of demented mind.

Nor was Hardy Zeph any better pleased by the aspect matters had assumed, though his objections were confined to the presence of the woman. Only for her being thrown upon their care; he would rather have welcomed the adventure, confident that he and Dainty Lance could hold their own against all the force Panther Paul could bring to bear against them.

A journey of a couple of hours carried them out of the broken region, to where two goodly sized streams converged together, fringed on each bank with trees and undergrowth of greater or less profusion.

Facing toward these streams, and forming a blunted shoulder nearly opposite the junction of the waters, was a bold hill of considerable size.

Here Dainty Lance halted and lifted the strange woman from the saddle, then spoke to Hardy Zeph:

"Take the horse and tie him over yonder under cover; then make haste back."

Though the wild, hunted look had not vanished from her eyes and pallid face, the woman in masculine attire made no attempt to escape, but followed Dainty Lance at his kindly signal.

Set deep into the hill, so that only the front, composed of green cottonwood logs, squared and closely jointed, was visible from the outside, was the winter-quarters of the young trappers.

The heavy door of hewn logs pinned together, was fastened by a stout padlock and chain

which quickly yielded to the key in Dainty Lance's hand.

Pushing open the door, he motioned the woman to enter, following after her.

An involuntary cry of pitying compassion broke from his lips as he saw how hungrily she eyed a smoked ham of venison that hung beside the fireplace. It was the stare of one who was well-nigh famished, yet she made no offer to touch the coveted food.

With generous haste, Dainty Lance set some bread and meat before her, and his eyes moistened as he saw how, even in her madness, the decorum of the happy days long gone by, restrained her from bolting the viands as the fierce cravings of hunger dictated.

He saw that his presence was a restraint, and though he feared she might injure herself by eating too fast and heartily, he could not bring himself to deny her, or remain as a guard, but hastily left the dug-out and rejoined his comrade, who was returning from caring for the horse.

"We stole a hoss—so they'll call it," abruptly began the young trapper. "That'll give 'em all the excuse they want. We kin look fer 'em by to-morrow, ef not to-day."

"We saved the life of their chief; they may put one deed against the other, and call it square," laughed Dainty Lance.

"Then we've got somethin' they want even more'n the hoss. Darn the wimmen, anyway!" growled Zeph, who had only known one woman intimately, his mother, whose caresses came from a club, whose prayers were drunken curses and scoldings. "They make trouble wherever they be! Ef we was alone, I wouldn't keer. We've got grub a-plenty, an' kin tote in wood an' water enough to last a month. We could lick out a gang ten times as strong as that outfit—but now!"

"Still, she is a woman, and as such we are bound to aid and protect her with our lives if it comes to the worst," said Lance with a quiet earnestness that silenced his mate's grumblings. "I am in hopes that those men will not come here, or make any further trouble, but it will do no harm to be on the safe side. We will get in a supply of wood and water, and place our trust in Providence."

Hardy Zeph uttered a snort that said more than words, but set to work with a will.

Meanwhile, the strange woman had satisfied her hunger, and was closely inspecting the interior of the building.

This had a regular roof and walls, though set its full depth in the hill, and was some fifteen feet square, by nine feet in height.

At regular intervals in the front of the building, were cut loopholes, now filled with closely-fitting blocks of wood on hinges and fastened by wooden buttons, so they could not be opened from the outside.

At present, however, these were concealed by the skins, wolf, deer, bear and buffalo, together with furs of beaver, otter and mink, which were hung along the walls with no little degree of taste.

Along the rear wall were erected two narrow bunks, raised on short legs above the ground, affording storage room beneath for traps and odds and ends. These bunks were like shallow boxes, and were filled with dry grass and leaves, over which were spread woollen blankets, to be reinforced by furs and hides when the cold of winter grew more biting.

The door was provided with stout wooden hooks, into which a heavy oaken bar was placed at night, or whenever necessary, other supports being sunk into the logs on both sides. When thus secured, the door could only be forced by artillery, or by being fairly blown to pieces.

The young trappers worked with a will, filling every available utensil with water, and storing away a large supply of wood for the fireplace.

The woman quietly watched their movements, keeping in a corner out of the way, and though she said nothing, Dainty Lance saw with pleasure that, since she had eaten and drank, the wild expression in her eyes had greatly softened.

Once or twice during the day, one or the other of the young trappers ascended the high hill above the dug-out, closely scrutinizing the broken country which lay in the direction of the canyon, but as often descended without having discovered any trace of human life.

"It may be that they don't mean to bother us," said Zeph, "but it won't do no harm fer us to keep on watch to-night. They didn't look like men as 'd easy give up the idea o' revenge, an' the woman yender killed one o' them—"

"How did she do it, then? The revolvers she carried have not been discharged for a week, at

least," said Dainty Lance, unable longer to smother the discovery he had made. "I could find no other firearms—"

"Who *did* kill the critter, then?" excitedly interrupted Zeph.

Dainty Lance shrugged his shoulders. That was a question he could not answer, though he would have given much to have had the power.

Zeph was less scrupulous than his friend, and turning to the stranger, who sat apart from them, he bluntly asked her if she had shot Dan Darby.

Not a sound passed her lips, but the old hunted look came back to her eyes, and she cowered low down, quivering as though she had been stricken a painful blow.

"She looks like a crazy woman!" muttered Zeph, and Dainty Lance touched him warningly on the shoulder.

"She has suffered severely, and it will take time for her to recover from the shock of that man's death. Don't speak to or notice her. In the morning she may be able and ready to explain everything."

Hardy Zeph obeyed, but from that time on he was careful to keep as far from the stranger as the circumscribed space of the dug-out would permit. He would rather have roomed with a wildcat than that weak woman.

Night came on without anything being seen or heard of Panther Paul and his band, and after securing the door, Dainty Lance prepared one of the bunks for the stranger, whom he soon induced to lie down and rest.

Hardy Zeph, declaring that he could not sleep, made his friend lie down while he kept guard, more for the purpose of watching the madwoman than through fear of the outlaws, who could not effect an entrance without making noise sufficient to awaken them, even should both sleep.

Dainty Lance, according to arrangement, was awakened about midnight, and found that the woman was sleeping soundly and heavily, having been so quiet that Hardy Zeph began to forget his suspicions in drowsiness.

Exchanging places, it was not long before Zeph was asleep, his subdued snoring, mingling with the steady breathing of this strange guest, by no means tending to dispel the drowsiness that hung upon the young trapper's eyelids.

For a time he battled against the temptation, but all was still without; the building was secure against surprise; he had slept but poorly on the past night; the woman was sleeping peacefully—and in less than an hour from the time when Hardy Zeph aroused him, Dainty Lance was leaning back against the wall, fast locked in slumber.

How long he remained thus he never knew, but all at once he awoke, feeling a powerful sense of something having gone amiss, his brain clear and every sense on the keen alert.

A sharp cry parted his lips as his eyes rested upon the bunk where the woman had been sleeping—had been, for it was now vacant!

Hardy Zeph was aroused by the exclamation, and as he leaped up, revolver in hand, he made the same discovery; that the strange woman was gone—that the door was unlatched and slightly ajar.

"She can't have gone far—I had just dropped into a brief doze, and she was lying there asleep then," said Dainty Lance, believing he was speaking nothing but the truth. "We will find her just outside."

"Let her go—we're better off without the mad critter, anyway!" muttered Zeph, but his words were unheeded.

Eager to repair the mistake he had made, and feeling as though he was responsible for the welfare of the mad stranger, Dainty Lance flung open the door and rushed outside, glancing around in search of the form which he felt confident could not be far away.

Grumbling, Hardy Zeph followed after, but look as they might, they could see nothing of the stranger.

"She's tuck the hoss an' lit out, I reckon," he said, in an unmistakable tone of relief. "Better let her go—"

Dainty Lance hastened over to the thicket of plum brush in which the animal had been tethered, but it was not there now. Beyond a doubt the woman had watched her chance, and stealing outside, had taken the horse and fled.

If so, pursuit would be hopeless, the night was so dark and cloudy. And what right would they have, anyhow, to follow and restrain her against her will?

Though he felt no little anxiety concerning her ultimate fate, Dainty Lance was in reality almost as greatly relieved as his friend, at having

the perplexing question thus solved for him. He had done the best he could. He was not to blame. Reasoning thus, he and Hardy Zeph retraced their steps to the dug-out, pausing for a moment before the open door to cast a final glance around them, then stepped inside.

Only to be felled senseless to the floor by swift and sure blows that alighted fairly upon their heads!

CHAPTER VI.

PANTHER PAUL MAKES HIS LEAP.

FOR an hour or more Panther Paul lay in that death-like swoon, but when he finally opened his eyes, his senses were perfectly restored, though some few of the events were but dim and confused shadows upon his mind.

To make everything clear, he bade Handsome Hal give a brief sketch of all that had happened since the bush yielded under his weight and allowed him to fall.

In a cold, hard tone, the disfigured outlaw obeyed, but not even this coldness could wholly disguise all that he had done for his chief, while hanging unconscious from the cedar shrub, and the dark eye of Panther Paul kindled as Handsome Hal proceeded.

"Joe Humbert refused—he counted his life worth more than that of his chief. The strangers refused to aid you, without their conditions were fully complied with. Time was precious, so I shot the fellow. It was the best I could do on the spur of the moment. If I exceeded my duty, I am here to abide the consequences."

Instead of speaking, Panther Paul arose and grasped the hand of Handsome Hal with a warm grip. It was clear that he counted a life sacrificed to save his, but a small sin.

At this greeting, Handsome Hal was clearly affected, and he spoke more rapidly, his tones were warmer, as he briefly detailed the rest of the events already known to the reader.

"Man or woman, that was Sure Death!" cried Panther Paul, his eyes glowing luridly. "Even as I fell over the edge of the canyon, I saw him rise up and fire at Dan Darby! There was no flame, no smoke, but death followed his his outstretched hand—and by all the fiends of the lower regions! I swear to exact a terrible revenge, not only for the death of poor Dan—the boldest and truest man among us all—but for the foul murder of his mates!"

All but Handsome Hal interchanged quick, covert glances, and from their sullen frowns it was clear that the less they had to do with the Mystic Marksman, the better they would be pleased.

Panther Paul sprung to his feet, but then sunk down again with an involuntary curse of pain, unable to stand alone.

His knees were strained by the shock and manner of arresting his fall. At that moment he believed himself a helpless cripple for life!

Even that did not cow his fiery spirit, nor shake his determination to avenge his strangely slaughtered comrades, and he sharply issued orders for his men to leave him, to follow on the trail and never give over the hunt until they had killed or captured the mysterious slayer.

Only Handsome Hal made any motion of obedience.

The rest drew apart, sullenly fingering their weapons, more afraid of Sure Death than of Panther Paul.

"We swore to follow wherever you might lead," said one of their number, speaking doggedly. "But we will not hunt the devil on our own hook. We have had enough, and more than enough of this Sure Death."

This rank mutiny was so unexpected, so contrary to the blind obedience which he had always received from his men, that Panther Paul was fairly struck dumb for the moment. And perhaps it was well for himself, as it certainly was for the speaker, that such was the case, for time was given Handsome Hal to interpose.

"From what they said, I don't believe those two trappers are far away. I can follow the trail and mark them down, better than the whole band could, for I can work and keep well covered at the same time.

"If they are given cause to suspect our intentions, and time to prepare for our coming, there will be more lives than one lost. So I say, let me go alone and spy them out. When I have learned all I can, I will return here.

"By that time, with proper care, you will be able to travel; or we will carry you on a litter. Without you, we might make a botch of the business; with you to lead and direct us, we are sure to succeed."

His rapid speech was like oil on troubled wa-

ters, and a minute later Handsome Hal was following the trail on foot.

Panther Paul now inspected the condition of his limbs, and found that they were by no means seriously injured, though the skin was broken and the sinews strained. By dint of persistent rubbing, he was soon enabled to bear his weight upon his feet, and long before Handsome Hal returned, he was nearly as good as before his fall.

The volunteer scout performed his work well, following the trail like a human sleuth-hound, yet keeping his advance so perfectly concealed that though he espied the look-out upon the hill far away, his coming was not seen.

He lay patiently hidden until Hardy Zeph descended from his observatory, then turned aside from the trail, for he no longer needed it as a guide. He knew that those he sought had their quarters somewhere near yonder hill, and that was clew enough to one so skillful as Handsome Hal.

It would be an admirable lesson of scouting skill and craft, to follow his movements closely, but to those not specially interested in that branch of knowledge, a minute record might prove wearisome.

Enough that he succeeded perfectly in his self-imposed task, making a wide circuit and creeping up the bank of the stream until directly opposite the dug-out, from whence he watched the movements of the young trappers, heard them speak, and from their words knew that the strange being whom suspicion indicated as Sure Death, was then inside the building.

This was the report which he brought back to Panther Paul, not long before sun set.

"Though they are only two, or three, counting the stranger," he added, "we are not strong enough to take them by open assault. They are prepared for a siege. In that building they can beat off an army."

"Those who are afraid, may hide their heads among the rocks!" cried Panther Paul, sharply. "I will carry out my oath of vengeance if I have to fight them alone!"

"In an open attack, they would do as they said—take back the life they gave you," said Handsome Hal, coldly. "If you will act on my advice, we can capture them and their quarters without burning a grain of powder."

These words served to calm the excitable chieftain, and he listened intently while Handsome Hal gave an accurate description of the building and its surroundings.

"With care, and taking advantage of the darkness, we can station ourselves on the hillside above the cabin, and lie there in wait until the door is opened in the morning. Then we can leap down upon them, and take them captive. Thus we will lose no more of our number, and have the three alive, to answer your questions and tell us what they may know about our mysterious enemy."

It was a cunning plan, one that promised easy success, and Panther Paul admitted as much, while the men were put in a much better humor than if they were expected to openly confront the dreaded Sure Death.

There was an abundance of time, and while waiting for the coming of night, a fire was kindled, steaks were cut from the body of the black horse, and the outlaws feasted merrily.

Put in a good humor by the prospect of success, Panther Paul forgot his bruises, and became very confidential with Handsome Hal, whose almost frenzied devotion, while his chief was lying betwixt life and death, the two witnesses had revealed during the scout's absence.

He laughingly referred to the blunder he had committed that morning early, in suspecting his friend, and then spoke of the strange fancy which Handsome Hal had taken—that the face of Sure Death was that of his dead wife.

Until now the disfigured outlaw had met him fully half-way, seeming proud of his chief's good will, but at that rude allusion, his good-humor vanished, and he relapsed into silence, deep and moody.

Clearly that was a painful subject to him.

At length Panther Paul and his men set out upon their toilsome journey through the rocky tract, now made dangerous by the gloom of the cloudy night.

For a mile or two they persevered on horseback, Handsome Hal acting as pilot, but then Panther Paul called a halt, and it was decided that they should leave the animals where they were for the present, finishing the rest of the journey on foot, which course was followed.

Panther Paul had overrated the power of his strained limbs, and more than once the party was forced to pause in order to relieve his pains by a brief rest, though, had he known what

precious minutes those were, he would have crawled upon his hands and knees rather than waste time.

It was to this cause that the madwoman owed her escape from capture, for she had not gone a short half-hour before the outlaws were surrounding the dug-out, noiselessly taking up their position on the hillside above and to each end of the building, lying in readiness to leap down upon their unsuspecting prey the moment the door should be opened in the morning.

This very caution prevented their discovering the door left ajar, for they half expected that one or both of the young trappers would be keeping guard, and they were careful not to pass close before the dug-out.

They had scarcely got fairly settled down in their ambush, when they heard the astonished exclamation uttered by Dainty Lance as he awoke from his involuntary nap, and discovered the absence of their guest.

A few moments later the door was flung wide open, and by the faint light which streamed out through the aperture from the smoldering fire, Panther Paul saw the two youths emerge, and stare anxiously around them.

He was just on the point of giving the signal that would hurl his men upon their game, when Hardy Zeph grumblingly mentioned the horse, and followed Dainty Lance to see if the mad fugitive had taken it with her.

Panther Paul saw his chance, and softly passed the word for all to descend without noise, leading the way in person, and taking up his stand close beside the door on the inside, clubbing one of his heavy revolvers.

He had time to repeat his orders for no unnecessary force to be used, and make it understood that the trappers were to be taken alive, to answer his questions.

Then, satisfied that the strange woman had indeed left them, Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph unsuspectingly walked into the trap set for them, being knocked down the moment they crossed the threshold.

When they recovered their senses, which was not until after the lapse of nearly half an hour, they found themselves bound hand and foot, sitting side by side on the floor, their backs propped up against the back wall.

Opposite them sat Panther Paul, placidly smoking his pipe, though the lurid glitter in his black eyes betrayed an inward heat and impatience, and as soon as he saw that they were able to understand him, he spoke, rapidly:

"Where is the person who bore you company here?"

"What right have you to ask?" shortly demanded Dainty Lance, his blood at fever heat, his eyes flashing.

"The right of might. If I raise my finger and make the faintest sound, you die like dogs. I can order you thrust into the fireplace, yonder, and my words would not be dry on my lips before you would find yourself roasting."

"I felt at the time, we were saving the life of a poison, treacherous serpent, but I did not expect to feel your fangs quite so soon," said Dainty Lance, with a bitter sneer.

Panther Paul flushed hotly, but bit his lips until he choked back the words that struggled for utterance.

When he spoke, it was in a cold, even tone.

"You did that without my asking. But I will not forget it, if you are frank and open spoken. Tell me who and what the stranger is. How does he kill my men—how did he slay Dan Darby to-day?"

"We know nothing about him," shortly responded Dainty Lance. "We never met before to-day—never expect to meet again."

"You lie!" snarled Panther Paul, his rage leaping forth hotly. "You would not have fought for a stranger against such odds—would not have risked your lives in his defense—would not have brought him here, to share your food and lodging—unless you were his friend, unless you knew him well, and were his allies."

"Now listen to me," he added, suddenly calming himself—a calmness that was even more devilish than his recent hot rage. "Unless you confess all, and tell me where I can find this cowardly assassin, I swear that you shall suffer ten thousand deaths in one!"

CHAPTER VII.

SURE DEATH TO THE RESCUE!

"As fer me, the sooner ye knock me on the head the better I'll like it. A man that'd be durned fool enough to risk his life to save sech a dirty cuss as you be, ain't got no right to live, anyway!" muttered Hardy Zeph, speaking in a tone of such utter disgust with himself that Handsome Hal burst into a short laugh.

His amusement was contagious, his mates joining in the laugh with a hearty good will, while even Panther Paul smiled with a grim humor instead of flashing forth in rage.

But still he held to the threats he had uttered, repeating them even more definitely, striving his best to break down the defiant will of Dainty Lance, whom he had decided upon as the best subject for his experiments.

After that hot outburst, he could not extort a single word from the lips of either of the young trappers.

Though he believed them not, they had given him all the information they could, and they were too high spirited to beg for mercy. So they bore his threats in silence.

"You shall have until daylight to think over what I have said," concluded Panther Paul, calming down and speaking in a cold, relentless tone that carried conviction with it.

"If you conclude to confess—to tell me what devilish means of destruction that assassin uses, and where he is now lurking—then you shall go free, and I will pay you for the trouble and inconvenience you have suffered: but if not—"

This hiatus was left to be filled in by their imagination—no difficult task after one glance into his glittering eyes and stern-set features.

Panther Paul turned away from his captives and directed the larger portion of his men to take up their stations outside the building, to guard against the stealthy approach of the dreaded enemy.

"Lay close, and fire upon anything that bears the appearance of life. The rascal must be somewhere near, and we have not made noise enough to alarm him. He will be coming back soon. Make sure work when he does."

As before, Handsome Hal was the first to set the example of unquestioning obedience to the orders of the chief, and he was but reluctantly followed by those designated for the unwelcome duty.

Panther Paul had made another unlucky speech, and though the outlaws dare not openly rebel, now that the chief was fairly himself again, they left the shelter of the cabin with hearts that were chilled with superstitious fears.

Inside, Panther Paul slept peacefully. Outside, his men cowered low in their hiding-places, seeing the dreaded form of the grim destroyer stalking along in every moving shadow, but never once raising their weapons or thinking of using them—only hoping and praying that they might escape notice themselves.

But the few hours before day-dawn passed without any especial alarm, and when Panther Paul was awakened by Handsome Hal, his first words were addressed to his captives.

They listened in silence, and when the outlaw chief paused, Dainty Lance made reply, speaking earnestly but calmly:

"We cannot give you the information you seek, because we are quite as ignorant as yourself on this point. Until she leaped over the canyon, yesterday, we never had met the person you think a man and call Sure Death."

"You are certain it was a woman?" demanded Handsome Hal, with a singular blending of emotions upon his face and in his voice.

Dainty Lance tersely repeated the reasons he had for this belief, but apparently Panther Paul was not convinced.

"Man or woman, Dan Darby came to his death by that hand, and he died in the same manner that marked the taking off of seven other stout men. There was no flash—no report—only the simple outstretching of a hand!"

"By a bullet from an air-gun, probably," quietly interposed Dainty Lance. "But she bore no such weapon, for I searched for it. Nor had her revolvers been discharged for at least a week. Whoever killed your friend, she did not."

"He knows so durned much, I reckon he could tell more yet, ef he was pinched right smart," uttered one of the outlaws, who had been watching the scene with interest.

"And speak he shall, if there is any virtue in torments and torture!" snarled Panther Paul. "I give them one hour more of grace. If they are then silent, I swear to outdo the very redskins in applying the torture!"

Handsome Hal quietly suggested that the interval named might be advantageously spent in preparing and eating breakfast; a speech that even Panther Paul received as timely.

Though they felt that their fate was sealed, the young trappers showed no outward signs of fear, whatever may have been passing through their minds.

During the time that Panther Paul slept, they had tried every means in their power to burst their bonds or free their hands, that they might

at least deal one stout blow before dying, but in vain. The cords had been applied by men that understood their business, and would neither break nor slip.

Satisfied that there was no earthly hope for them, the brave lads schooled themselves to meet death unflinchingly, and not gratify their enemies by a display of human weakness.

The outlaws cooked an abundance of food and ate heartily, but offered their prisoners none. As Panther Paul bluntly said, "it was folly to waste good provisions on dead men."

While eating, he and his men maliciously ran over the various methods of torture which they had either seen or heard of, but if they did so with the hope of breaking down their captives, their breath was wasted.

This meal disposed of, Panther Paul once more propounded his questions, but silence was his only answer, and in a furious rage he bade his minions set to work.

Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph were carried outside the cabin, that they might see what preparations were being made for their torture.

Two stout posts were cut from the timber bordering the smaller stream, then planted firmly in the ground only a few rods from the dug-out. Other of the outlaws were procuring dry wood which was piled up close at hand.

"That is to finish the work, if we cannot make you speak by other means," said Panther Paul, with a fiendish laugh.

"You shall be bound to those stakes, and slowly roasted alive—the fires shall be so regulated as to leave you life for many hours, if not days. Does the prospect please you?"

There was no reply in words, but Hardy Zeph, though still bound hand and foot, flung himself head-foremost against the stomach of the outlaw, knocking him backward with the force of the unexpected assault, falling upon him and striving to fasten his strong, sharp teeth in the throat of his enemy.

With an angry scream, Handsome Hal leaped to the spot, his bony fingers twining themselves around the lad's neck, throttling him and tearing him away with the resistless strength of a giant; but not before Hardy Zeph had partially succeeded in his object, for as Panther Paul staggered to his feet, wild with rage, the blood was running in a stream from his throat.

He snatched a revolver from his belt and leveled it full at the head of the dauntless trapper, who met his gaze fully and spat out a mouthful of skin and flesh.

The hammer fell, but no report followed the explosion of the cap, and as by a miracle Zeph was saved from instant death.

Handsome Hal, again cold and composed, now that his master was saved, interposed and checked Panther Paul as he was again cocking his pistol.

"If you kill him outright, he cannot give the information you seek. Your revenge will be none the less sweet for being prolonged."

Had any other man interfered between the raging outlaw and his victim, it would almost certainly have been fatal to advocate as well as client, but Handsome Hal had given such repeated proof of his devotion of late, that his words produced the desired effect, and after a brief hesitation Panther Paul returned the weapon to his belt.

"I don't know whether you or I hate him the worst," he said with a short, cruel laugh. "I would have given him an easy death, but you have doomed him to tenfold torture—to suffer a thousand deaths in one."

"He is nothing to me," was the cold, measured response. "I care not whether he lives or dies, if only he will tell us the secret of this strange being—man or woman."

"Even if I knowed, I'd see you eternally—fust, an' then I wouldn't speak!" cried Hardy Zeph, defiantly, then clearing his mouth with utter disgust, he added "Pah! 't tastes wuss then turkey-buzzard an' pole-cat b'iled down into one!"

There was a low snicker among the spectators at this speech, but utter gravity was upon every face as Panther Paul glared around in search of the delinquent.

By his sharply uttered commands, Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph were carried to the stakes and bound there, side by side. Then their hands and feet were freed, that they might afford greater amusement by having the power to move their head and limbs under the influence of sudden fear.

Despite his intense rage at being defied so long, Panther Paul was willing to delay his vengeance in hopes of learning something definite concerning the secret slayer, and had so

ordered his programme in hopes of breaking down the courage of the young trappers.

He himself dealt the first blow, measuring off a few paces and then leveling his rifle full at the head of Hardy Zeph.

Pausing thus for several moments, during which the young man boldly eyed him, he slightly shifted his aim and fired.

Zeph felt as though a red-hot iron had been pressed against the side of his head, but he never flinched or stirred a muscle, though the blood began to trickle down his neck, and he knew that the malignant outlaw had marked him for life, by sending a bullet through the cartilage of his ear.

"That is only a taste of what is coming," said Panther Paul as he drew near to observe the result of his shot. "Bit by bit you shall be thus marked, but we don't intend to kill you outright—not until hours and days have passed; unless you confess all that I wish to hear."

"Parker, you are the surest shot. Go over yonder and clip me the end of this young rooster's beak. Just bury your lead—sting him, but don't slay."

With a brutal laugh, the fellow designated by name strode toward the thicket where the horse had been concealed, measuring off thirty yards, confident in his skill.

Panther Paul and his men parted to give the lead free passage, and curiously watched the young trapper who was to be thus cruelly mutilated. But if they expected to see him flinch, their hopes were disappointed.

A statue of stone could not have stood more motionless.

Imitating the tactics of his chief, Parker deliberately raised his gun, but at the moment when his mates were expecting to hear the whip-like crack of his rifle, the fellow started with a sharp cry, whether of fear or warning, none could tell.

And the next moment there came the same peculiar explosion that had heralded the death of Dan Darby—the outlaw's hat flew into the air as he whirled half around—a bloody mist surrounded his head—a head no longer, for the bones of his skull were shattered in a horrible manner, down even to the lower jaw, and he fell heavily to the ground, a headless corpse!

Even Panther Paul seemed stupefied by the terrible sight, but Handsome Hal shouted aloud:

"Sure Death! he is in the thicket yonder! I caught a glimpse of his face as he fired!"

The words seemed to break the spell of horror that had fallen upon the awestruck outlaws, and Panther Paul cried:

"Charge! close in on him before he can reload! Man or devil, he shall not escape me now!"

But though all of his men sprung into sudden motion, only Handsome Hal faced in the same direction as the bold outlaw; the others crowded past the prisoners, making for the dug-out, fleeing from the horrible unseen death.

Just when the pressure was thickest around them, Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph felt the tightly-drawn lassoes which encircled their waists part and drop around their feet, while a clear voice hissed in their ears:

"Flee while you can—run fast and far, for death awaits you here! Not a word, but flee!"

A single glance showed them that in flight alone lay any chance of safety, for already the outlaws were crowding into the dug-out, and there would not be time, even if they had weapons, to whip them ere Panther Paul and Handsome Hal, the two most to be dreaded, would realize the truth and rush back to cut them off.

Hardy Zeph, even in that moment of thrilling excitement, was cool enough to reflect that he would be the one Panther Paul would strive hardest to secure, and he resolved to sacrifice himself if necessary, to insure the escape of his friend.

Side by side they rushed past the dug-out, and at that moment they heard the angry yell of Panther Paul as he discovered their escape and flight.

"Straight on!" cried Hardy Zeph, falling a pace behind Dainty Lance. "It's life or death now! Run—for life!"

Dainty Lance needed no such prompting. Life is very sweet to one so young and full of spirits.

He ran as he had never run before, heading down the river, where the ground was comparatively smooth and level, but ready to take to the rock-strewn hills as soon as he found the outlaws had taken saddle.

Thus he ran for several hundred yards, when he for the first time missed the answering thud of his comrade's feet, and glanced apprehensively over his shoulder, only to trip on a stone and fall headlong with crushing force!

CHAPTER VIII.

HELPLESS IN MID-AIR.

HARDY ZEPH ran at the heels of Dainty Lance barely long enough to utter the words we have recorded, then, with a self-devotion as beautiful as rare in one so young and uncultured, he turned around and ran swiftly back toward the enemy, his teeth firm-set, his head flung back like that of a racing deer.

Such a course seemed suicidal, but the young trapper knew that there was one hope for him, despite his seeming folly.

He saw that only Panther Paul and Handsome Hal remained outside the building, the other outlaws being half-mad with fear of the terrible marksman, thinking only of putting a stout breastwork between themselves and the secret slayer.

He felt that if he could repass the dug-out before they regained their sober senses, he stood a fair show of escape, since there would only be two foemen to encounter.

These, the outlaw chief and his devoted follower, had run nearly to the plum-thicket before they discovered the escape, and even then, though they yelled loudly and angrily, the strange rescue confused them, and they lost several precious moments before they could decide upon the proper course to pursue.

The question would have been easily settled so far as Panther Paul was concerned, could he have caught a glimpse of the hated Sure Death, or even known that he was still in the cover from whence had sped the shot that laid the tall outlaw low, but the sight of Hardy Zeph dashing past the dug-out, following close along the base of the hill, clearly hoping to thus pass them by and gain the rocky hills beyond, drove all else from his mind, and shouting fiercely, he sprung forward to cut the fugitive off.

Handsome Hal, from his position to the left, had the advantage of several yards' start, and Hardy Zeph saw that one if not both of the outlaws would cross his path before he could pass the point they were heading for.

It was too late to flinch now. He could hear the growing cries from the inmates of the dug-out, who were beginning to recover from their panic as they saw Sure Death had made no attempt to improve his advantage, and he knew that they would either kill or take him prisoner if he should attempt to retrace his steps.

Instead of slackening his pace, he put on a fresh amount of steam, dashing ahead like a quarter-horse, bracing his muscles for the coming shock.

"Don't shoot—take him alive!" grated Panther Paul, straining every nerve to overtake Handsome Hal.

Just when the collision seemed unavoidable, Handsome Hal trod upon a loose stone, his ankle turned beneath his weight, and he fell sprawling, the force of the fall extracting a painful grunt from his lips.

Close upon his heels, Panther Paul could not check his pace or turn aside in time, and leaped into the air with an activity that well justified his name, alighting fairly before Hardy Zeph with a yell of vengeful triumph, feeling confident of an easy victory.

But in this he reckoned without his host.

The blood of the young trapper was at boiling heat, and he would not have flinched from an army, just then.

One more swift stride—then both fists shot out and came in contact with the breast of the outlaw chief with the force of a battering ram.

Both went down before the heavy shock, rolling over and over on the hard ground, but Hardy Zeph had fallen uppermost and was first to recover his footing, at the same time snatching up a revolver that had fallen from Panther Paul's belt.

For a moment he felt strongly tempted to pause long enough to send a bullet through the brain of the ruffian who had treated him so cruelly, and doubtless he would have done so, only Handsome Hal was scrambling to his feet, while several of the outlaws who had sought refuge in the dug-out, were now emerging, rifles in hand.

One swift glance showed him all this, and in ignorance of the mishap which had befallen Dainty Lance, Zeph uttered a taunting yell of defiance, hoping thus to enrage the larger portion of the band into following him, then darted away, seemingly none the worse for his tumble.

Panther Paul had not escaped so easily, and with the same devotion that had marked his former actions, Handsome Hal paused to pick him up instead of pressing on in pursuit.

Gouging the dirt and dust from his eyes, Panther Paul glared around in search of Hardy

Zeph, yelling like a demon as he sighted him, and bounding away in pursuit, at the same time shouting for his men to follow, vowing to massacre them one and all should they suffer the fugitive to escape.

Hardy Zeph heard these threats, and felt a peculiar thrill of satisfaction as his backward glance showed him that nearly if not all of the outlaws were now in chase after him. This, though he began to realize that he had not passed entirely unscathed through that collision and confused scramble.

There was a sharp pain in his right side, probably proceeding from a strain, that might prove fatal to his hopes, if it grew worse instead of passing off.

To all appearance, both Panther Paul and Handsome Hal were something the worse for their tumble, and before half a mile of the broken ground had been covered, they were each one passed by the more nimble of the outlaws.

A grim smile curled the young trapper's lip as he distinctly heard Panther Paul order his men to take the fugitives alive, though he knew the words sprung from no motives of mercy.

"They won't all ov 'em go back on thar own legs, then!" he muttered, griping the revolver firmly.

Despite the growing pain in his side, Hardy Zeph fairly held his own, thanks to his more intimate knowledge of the ground, and after a few minutes of steady racing, he put a cunning ruse into execution that more than doubled his advantage.

The outlaws saw him suddenly veer sharply to the right, running almost at right-angles with his former course, and believing him turned aside by some unexpected obstacle in his path, they altered their course accordingly, straining every nerve in the effort to intercept him before he could round the obstruction, yelling forth their exultation.

But then Hardy Zeph uttered a taunting yell and darted away at another sharp angle, while the pursuers were forced to halt in order to keep from plunging into a deep and wide chasm which the fugitive had thus adroitly thrown between himself and them.

Fairly wild with rage, and for the moment forgetful of the strict orders given them by Panther Paul, the outlaws sent a hasty volley of bullets after the fugitive, who instantly wheeled and leveled his revolver, sending a ball through the shoulder of one of his enemies, then resumed his flight with a shout of defiance.

The chasm could neither be leaped nor descended in safety, and there was nothing for it but to dash along the verge until a more favorable point presented itself.

Had Hardy Zeph been in his usual good trim, the advantage he had thus gained would almost certainly have insured his escape, but the sharp pain in his side was steadily growing worse, and even now he could not draw a full breath.

Another half-hour of such terrible exertion would "double him up," to use his own thought, and he knew that in that length of time he could not throw his dogged pursuers off his track.

There was only one alternative: he must reach some spot where he could stand at bay and make a stout fight for life.

He had five shots yet remaining, and believed he would have time to reload the chamber recently discharged.

There were only seven men in chase, and he believed they would be too angry to think or act with coolness.

"Mebbe I kin make matters more even afore they know the danger they're runnin'," he reflected, racing along. "Ef my side holds out until I kin make that hole, they won't be many o' the p'izen imps left fer Sure Death to massacre!"

The point he hoped to reach was still over a mile away—equal to thrice that distance of level ground. And knowing that every moment, every yard of ground gained was precious, with that killing pain growing steadily worse, he clenched his teeth and headed straight for the goal he had in view.

Under other circumstances he would have taken a more roundabout course, but now he dared not. Better face the rougher ground while his enemies were endeavoring to retrieve the mistake they had made. One consolation, the lesson he had read them, would cause them to keep directly in his footsteps, and not attempt any more "short-cuts."

Presently Hardy Zeph slackened his pace a trifle, preparing himself for a leap that would have been difficult and dangerous enough under the most favorable circumstances.

Directly before him stretched a rift in the rocks, full six yards wide, and so deep that the

bottom even at noonday, was shrouded in gloom and dampness.

In order to reach the only point where he could hope to do successful battle with the enemy at such long odds, it was necessary for him to cross this chasm, to leap from and alight upon solid rock, smooth and affording poor foothold; no easy feat, as any athlete can testify.

Collecting all his powers, when within a few yards of the rift, Hardy Zeph dashed forward at full speed, stepping short and quick, and rising into the air, shot across the dreaded barrier, alighting upon the further side, but with only a few inches to spare—so few that one of his feet slipped—his body toppling backward, hanging for moment over the abyss!

With a violent effort that severely wrenched every muscle in his body, Hardy Zeph managed to fling himself forward, falling heavily upon the hard rock. But in doing so, his other foot slipped, and his lower limbs sunk over the escarpment, his weight so evenly balanced that it seemed as though the slightest movement or struggle on his part must hurl him down to meet death upon the rocks below.

Even his stout heart grew sick with fear for a moment as he felt himself slowly slipping further down the smooth rock, while his fingers sought in vain to find a crack, crevice or a tiny projection in the flat surface, by aid of which he might crawl back to life.

Those were moments of indescribable horror, such as return in nightmare dreams to haunt the luckless wretch who may have experienced the like.

Then—just how he accomplished the feat, Hardy Zeph could never say—he made a superhuman effort, slowly dragging himself out of the clutches of grim death, and staggering a few yards from the chasm, sunk down in a heap, breathless, unconscious, hearing nothing of the ferocious yells which the outlaws uttered as they came up and beheld him lying there helpless, knowing nothing more until he awoke to find himself bound in the hands of his enemies, while from the other side of the abyss, Panther Paul was pronouncing the sentence of a horrible doom upon him.

"He has given us trouble enough, curse him!" snarled the outlaw chief, with a grimace of pain, for he was sore in every joint and covered with bruises from his fall.

"If he was not crippled, I'd take him back to the cabin, and torture him for a week, but we can't carry him so far.

"Strip off his clothes, and twist them into a rope stout enough to hang him with. Tie one end around his throat. Lower him over the edge until his feet rest on one of those small ledges, then fasten the rope above, drawing it just tight enough not to choke him while he stands upright. Lively, now!"

At first glance this will not seem the exquisite cruelty it really was, and Hardy Zeph listened with a dull surprise that no worse tortures were dealt out to him, but ere the passage of many minutes, he was doomed to realize the full horror of his situation.

Panther Paul's orders were quickly put into execution, the willing ruffians laughing and jesting as they performed their work, stripping their victim almost naked, binding his hands tightly to his sides and knotting rags around his ankles, with a short connecting link between.

The twisted rope was knotted around Zeph's throat, in such a manner that he would slowly strangle to death when his body was suspended from it, then another band was passed beneath his arms, and four men lowered him over the face of the chasm, steadying him in an upright position until his feet rested upon a tiny ledge of rocks, barely wide enough to support his heels, thus throwing a terrible strain upon the muscles of his calves and thighs.

Then the rope was made fast to a heavy boulder on the level, being drawn so taut that the hapless trapper could only escape being throttled by standing stiffly erect, thus keeping every muscle in his body painfully strained.

"When you get tired of standing thus, pray for the rope to break and send you to a speedy death on the rocks below," cried Panther Paul, with a loud, cruel laugh.

One by one the outlaws recrossed the chasm, and spent some few minutes in mocking their helpless victim, but though he seemingly enjoyed the brutal sport as much as any of the rest, Panther Paul put a summary end to it.

"He is disposed of, sure enough. Back to the cabin! There is the other young rascal, and then Sure Death! We must hunt him down and avenge Parker—all of those whom he has assassinated."

"We are as likely to find him here as there," said Handsome Hal. "He is clearly a friend if not the partner of yonder rascal. He may have followed us—he may even now be lurking near among these rocks, waiting to rescue his friend."

Panther Paul seemed struck by this reasoning, while his men drew involuntarily together as they glared uneasily around as though expecting to behold some fearful vision.

"I don't pretend to advise you," added Handsome Hal, in a quiet, careless tone. "You are our chief, and we have only to obey your orders. But it would be surer to kill that fellow at once, or else leave some one on guard here until he kills himself, lest Sure Death or some other interferes to save him from the doom he so richly merits."

"You are the only one I could trust to face Sure Death, if he should be near, as you suggest, and I need you over yonder," said Panther Paul impatiently. "But so be it. Hampton shall stay with you. Keep close covered, and if Sure Death does put in an appearance, give a good account of him."

"If not, follow after us as soon as that fellow dies."

Neither Handsome Hal nor Hampton appeared over pleased at being selected for this duty, but Panther Paul was fairly himself again, and they made no audible objection.

With a parting taunt at his helpless victim, Panther Paul turned his back and hastened away in the direction of the distant dug-out, leaving the two men on guard.

"If I had dreamed of his picking us out for the job, I would never have said what I did," uttered Handsome Hal, in a tone of unmitigated disgust, as soon as he saw that Panther Paul was too far away to hear his speech. "But never mind. It won't be long before we can follow them. In the meantime, let's make ourselves as comfortable as we can, while strictly performing our duty. There is a chance that Sure Death may be lurking around, and so we had better get under cover."

These words did not tend to reassure Hampton, who was bold enough when he knew what he was fighting, but was superstitious even beyond the generality of his class.

Had he been alone, he would undoubtedly have taken to flight, but he knew that Handsome Hal would report him, when certain punishment would await him at the chief's hands.

So he made the best of a bad bargain, crouching down under cover of the rocks, where his rear was protected from sight, but where he could watch Hardy Zeph quite handily.

Handsome Hal passed some rods down the rift, and also hid himself among the rocks.

Although only a few minutes had passed since he was suspended in mid-air, with death above and death below him, Hardy Zeph was already realizing the fiendish skill of Panther Paul in inventing diabolical tortures.

Every muscle in his body was aching terribly, and it seemed as though death would be a welcome relief. His limbs were growing numb beneath him, his toes were drooping and beginning to cramp, he was trembling in every fiber.

More than once he was tempted to end the hopeless struggle by relaxing his stiffened muscles, but each time he doggedly fought back the temptation. He would only die when he could live no longer.

Then a wild hope suddenly found birth in his heart.

He saw a dark form leap over the rocks that guarded the rear of Hampton—saw the bright flashing of steel as two bodies closed in a sudden, silent death-grapple!

CHAPTER IX.

A MYSTERIOUS OCCURRENCE.

AFTER INSURING the death by torture of Hardy Zeph, as he believed, Panther Paul made all possible haste back to the dug-out, where he knew that Dainty Lance was awaiting him, and from whose lips he swore he would wring the truth before he gave over his tortures.

Panther Paul had not witnessed the capture himself, but several among his men assured him that even as they started in chase, according to his commands, they saw the other portion of the band pouncing upon Dainty Lance, who had fallen headlong with such force that he was knocked senseless, recovering only to find himself a helpless prisoner in the hands from which he had so well-nigh escaped.

A sullen, defiant prisoner Panther Paul found him, bound and closely guarded inside the dug-out, the outlaws being only too glad of such an

excuse for keeping under cover which would protect them from the terrible Sure Death.

The worst passions of the outlaw were dominant now, and as he confronted the young trapper, he poured forth a torrent of curses, insults and threats, even using his foot and fist upon the bound man, such was his devilish temper, when Dainty Lance gazed at him with a look of utter scorn and contempt.

"Your mate has died the death of a dog!" snarled the outlaw chief. "We caught him and hung him with his own clothes. More fortunate than you—your punishment is all to come. You shall be tortured as never man was tormented before, unless you confess the truth. Tell me who and what this mysterious or cowardly Sure Death is—tell me by what strange means he is enabled to butcher my men without exposing himself—tell me where he has his hiding-place, and then when the assassin is in my hands, you may go, free as air!"

Never a word spoke Dainty Lance, nor did a muscle of his stern set countenance quiver as he heard of how Hardy Zeph had suffered, though his heart felt sick within him, and he could have wept for bitter grief had he been alone, with no exultant foes to triumph over his emotion.

Panther Paul raised his clenched fist, but then turned abruptly on his heel and left the cabin, afraid to trust himself longer with the prisoner, lest by a single blow he should forever ruin his hopes of learning all about the mystic marksman.

With a revolver drawn and ready for use, Panther Paul hastened toward the thicket where Handsome Hal saw, or fancied he saw, the being whom they called Sure Death, followed reluctantly and at a respectful distance by his men, who held themselves in readiness to beat a speedy retreat the moment their dreaded enemy should reveal himself or strike another blow. But the thicket was reached and penetrated without the expected alarm, and after a few moments they heard the voice of Panther Paul calling them to his side.

The thicket was empty, but various tracks were deeply imprinted upon the loose, rich, leaf-mold, and prominent among these were the small, trim footprints, similar to those so carefully noted on the cliff above the valley in which Bradford had been slain.

"He has taken horse and ridden away—these tracks are the hoof-marks of the animal Dan Darby used to own. If the rascal was the ghost or devil you believe, he would hardly take so much trouble or leave such a broad trail behind."

"To lead them into a trap, as was fool enough to follow him," muttered one of the outlaws, evidently dreading what he plainly saw was coming.

Nor was he mistaken. Unable to follow the trail himself, for his strained and bruised muscles were stiffening, the outlaw chief bade his men take it up and never leave it until they had killed or taken prisoner the murderer of their fellows.

In silence they set off along the trail, which led them through the timber and up the creek for the present, not daring to openly disobey the chief.

Panther Paul painfully returned to the dug-out, feeling his injuries more and more sorely as his blood cooled down, closing and barring the door, alone with Dainty Lance.

It would be a disagreeable task to record all that he said and did to his helpless prisoner, during the next two hours. Enough has been shown of his brutal, fiendish temper to indicate that Dainty Lance was given little peace during that period.

But practice what art he might, Panther Paul could not wring a word of confession from the lips of the young trapper, and as he was growing more and more fierce with each failure, perhaps it was well for Dainty Lance that the heavy tramping of feet without and a gasping signal, gave his tormentor other matter to think about.

Recognizing a friend in the one who uttered the signal, Panther Paul flung open the door without any parley, and Handsome Hal entered, sinking down upon one of the bunks the very picture of exhaustion, his parched lips uttering sounds that could not have been understood, only for his motioning hand, showing that he wished the door closed and barred.

Mechanically Panther Paul obeyed, while Handsome Hal staggered to where the water stood, drinking long and heartily.

"Where is Hampton? what has happened?" demanded Panther Paul when the disfigured outlaw arose, with a long breath.

"Dead, even he had as many lives as a cat!"

exclaimed Handsome Hal, facing the chief with a gloomy air. "I bear their marks, but I managed to outrun them. They will be along before many minutes—better call in the boys—"

A furious volley of curses burst from the lips of the chief, mingled with words enough to show Handsome Hal just how the case stood, and the coolness with which he set about preparing for the defense of the cabin, soon calmed the other.

Questions and answers made a long story of it, broken as it was by more than one false alarm where one or the other fancied they detected the footfalls of the enemy without, but a condensed statement must answer here.

Handsome Hal had been lying under cover, watching Hardy Zeph, and waiting for his strength or resolution to give way and end the terrible ordeal he was undergoing, when he was startled by the sounds of clashing steel, and leaped to his feet, barely in time to witness the death of his comrade.

An enemy had leaped on him from behind, taking him by surprise, but Hampton made a desperate struggle, grappling and rolling over and over with his antagonist, until locked in each other's arms, they fell down the abyss, to meet death on the rocks hundreds of feet below.

Handsome Hal had barely time to see this, when he heard a rifle-shot, and felt the bullet break the skin on his side, in a direct line with his heart, and then saw half a dozen men darting toward him, brandishing their weapons.

Not knowing how many more there might be, he dared not hesitate, but leaped over the chasm and fled with all speed.

"And they rescued that cursed trapper!" snarled Panther Paul, his eyes glowing, his teeth grating savagely together.

"His body, maybe; no more," said Handsome Hal with a hard laugh. "I had my orders to wait until the fellow was dead, and you never yet knew me to fail in carrying out your will. I did not fail now. I paused long enough to send a bullet through his breast, and to see his feet drop from the ledge. He hung by the neck when I leaped across the rift."

Panther Paul grasped his hand with a savage joy, while Dainty Lance turned sick as death and closed his eyes with a cold shudder of horror.

In a cold, even tone, as though narrating the adventure of some stranger, Handsome Hal told how he fled and was pursued, how he was repeatedly fired upon, but never once touched after that first shot before he realized his peril; how he was driven far away from the dug-out, before he could double on his pursuers and throw them in the rear again; how he was waylaid by one cunning foe, whose pistol was snapped not six feet from his breast, his life being saved by a defective cap; how he closed with the fellow and left him dead upon the blood-stained rocks, then resumed his flight with his vindictive pursuers close upon his heels while the hot blood flowed freely from a long gash in his breast; how he finally distanced them, and reached the cabin, almost exhausted.

With a sympathy and hearty good-will such as he very seldom exhibited even to his most intimate friends, Panther Paul insisted on caring for the injuries Handsome Hal had received, washing and bandaging the wounds with a gentle touch that a woman could not have surpassed.

The hours rolled by, and still there came no attack; though one or the other of the outlaws kept constant guard at the loopholes, they could see or hear nothing suspicious.

"They were still in sight when I struck the level ground. It does not seem likely that they would give over the chase, so easily," said Handsome Hal, thoughtfully.

It was quite mid-afternoon when the tramping of feet was again heard, and the two outlaws hastened to the loopholes, rifle in hand, only to find that it was the band of men whom Panther Paul had sent after Sure Death, returning as they went, empty-handed.

They were admitted, and Panther Paul questioned them as to what they had done, speaking with a softness that was flatly belied by the hot glow in his eyes.

"We followed the trail as you said," uttered the member of the band whom his comrades had put forward as spokesman, little as he appeared to relish the job. "It led us n'arly no'ther nigh six miles, over hard ground to pick a trail out o', then we spied the critter—Darby's old hoss—mong a whcen o' others."

"We played snake fer awhile, an' finally maniged to make out that our game—man, ghost or devil—had j'ined a gang o' twenty-odd trappers."

"We didn't see him, but the loss was thar, an' I hear the men talkin' 'bout you an' us, cussin' like they wouldn't ax no better fun then to chaw us up; so he must 'a' told 'em all about our outfit. Any way, they was too big a crowd for us to handle, an' so we stole away an' made haste to fetch you the news."

There was something in the manner of the fellow while uttering these words that gave Panther Paul the impression that he was lying, palming off a false report in hopes of concealing their cowardice, and, right or wrong, he felt tolerably sure that they had passed the time in hiding.

He bluntly said as much, adding:

"In the morning I will take the trail myself, and if I find you have been trying to deceive me, look out for snags!"

The fellow protested that he had only spoken the truth, and there the matter was suffered to drop for the present.

Now that he could be relieved from keeping ward and watch, Panther Paul once more turned his attentions to Dainty Lance, questioning him concerning the party who had attempted to rescue Hardy Zeph.

"Strangers would not have interfered without first trying to find out which side was in the wrong. They must have been your friends and allies. One of them may even have been the murderer of my men."

As before, Dainty Lance refused to speak, and by Panther Paul's orders, the young trapper's feet were bared, and two men held him before the fire, so close that the heat began to form blisters on the bottoms of his feet.

Dainty Lance struggled furiously, but as his arms were bound, he soon ceased, preferring to suffer mutely rather than give his enemy the satisfaction of witnessing his futile rage.

Slivers were thrust beneath his nails, and locks of hair were plucked from his head, all without eliciting the desired information, until even Panther Paul tired of the brutal amusement, though he found difficulty in concealing the intense chagrin he felt, as he said:

"This is only a feeble specimen of the tortures that await you to-morrow, unless you open your mouth and confess every thing. Until then you can think it over."

The shades of evening settled over the earth, and still nothing had been seen or heard of the enemy from whose vengeance Handsome Hal had so narrowly escaped.

The long delay made Panther Paul believe that they had concluded discretion was the better part of valor, and had retreated from a struggle where all the odds were against them; still, he did not neglect any precaution.

After they had eaten a hearty meal, he stationed three men on the outside of the building, at different points, so that an enemy could not approach the dug-out without being discovered, Handsome Hal volunteering to act as their head and director, leaving the chief to the repose his bruises so much required.

Though there were men enough left inside to keep watch over the prisoner, if necessary, Panther Paul told them they might sleep until it was time to relieve those outside. This was through no particular consideration for them, but if the story of Sure Death and the band of trappers being so nigh, was true, it would be as well to have every man in good fighting trim.

By his orders, Dainty Lance was placed in an upright position against the end wall opposite the fireplace, a noose around his throat and the other end of the halter fastened to a stout pin in the wall above his head.

"If you get tired of standing up, relax your muscles; the rope will keep you from hurting yourself by falling on the floor," said Panther Paul, with a sneering laugh. "There's not much danger of your strangling to death, even if you should try to cheat me that way. Your struggles would awaken some one of us."

"What I want is to insure you a good night's reflection. If you conclude to speak out before morning, just call out, and you shall be attended to."

With a parting laugh, he turned away and lay down upon the bunk nearest the fire, wrapping a blanket around him, and despite the aching of his manifold bruises, he soon fell fast asleep.

His men were not long in following suit, and Dainty Lance was the only one left awake in the building, a prey to bitter thoughts and reflections.

It was nearly midnight when Panther Paul awoke, and mechanically turned his eyes toward the further end of the room.

Instantly he leaped to his feet, a wild yell of

amazement bursting from his lips as he gazed around the room.

His prisoner was no longer standing against the wall, where dangled the empty noose, nor was he visible anywhere!

Panther Paul rushed to the door; it was still fastened on the inside. He wildly charged his astonished mates with having freed the prisoner, but they strenuously declared that they had seen nor heard anything unusual since they lay down to sleep.

Their amazement and superstitious terror could not be counterfeit; he saw that they were as innocent as himself.

He flung open the door, and rushed forth, followed by his men, to meet Handsome Hal and his comrades, alarmed by the wild uproar, and the former declared that no living being had approached the building, nor had the door been opened that night since Panther Paul himself closed it!

CHAPTER X.

HARDY ZEPH AT WORK.

If an enemy to them, then a friend to him.

Such was the first thought that flashed across the mind of the young trapper as he saw a human form leap upon one of his guards, driving him forward upon his face, at the same time striking swiftly with a knife that flashed brightly in the noonday sun.

Hoping for rescue, praying for the success of the stranger, Hardy Zeph watched the desperate struggle.

Though taken by surprise, Hampton made a stout fight, being tough, wiry and active, a past master of the art of rough-and-tumble fighting. It chanced, too, that the surprise was almost equalized by the difficulty which the unknown had found in leaping upon him, owing to the outlaw's position beneath the mass of rock.

Rolling over and over, the battle-ground being a level floor of rock that extended to the very verge of the abyss, each armed with a knife, the two men fought with a silent ferocity that belonged to wild beasts rather than human beings.

Once or twice they drew dangerously close to the escarpment, but as often receded from the fall that meant absolute destruction, struggling furiously, their knives both gleaming red in the sunlight, their heavy panting distinctly audible to Hardy Zeph.

Scarcely a minute of this brute-like grapple, then the combatants separated and each leaped away from the other, though still face to face, with blood boiling fiercely.

They had both acted on the same impulse, thinking to take the other by surprise and end the contest by an appeal to a surer weapon than cold steel.

Both snatched their revolvers from their belts, Hampton a thought the quickest, but as he raised his weapon, he first recognized his adversary, and a cry of astonishment burst from his lips. His weapon was discharged, but the shock of a wonderful discovery somewhat disturbed his aim, and the bullet that was meant to end the struggle, only inflicted a flesh wound upon the other, and acted as a spur.

Like an echo the second revolver spoke, and with a half-yell, half-groan, Hampton staggered back, pressing one hand to his breast, the hot life-blood spurting through between his fingers, straight from his bullet-pierced heart.

With a cat-like leap his destroyer was upon him before he could fall, and with a single thrust of his foot, hurled the death-stricken wretch from the level platform over the verge of the chasm, from the depth of which came back the sickening sound of the body dashing from side to side of the narrow rift, leaving a bloody trail upon the frost-eaten rocks.

All this Hardy Zeph had seen with a painful interest that words are powerless to do justice to, but an involuntary cry of astonishment and despair burst from his lips as the victor turned his face in that direction—for he recognized in his supposed friend, the man called Handsome Hal; an outlaw, one who had been foremost in capturing him and placing him in this terrible position, consequently an enemy!

This revulsion from hope to utter despair was too much, and the young trapper's overtasked muscles gave way beneath his weight, and Hardy Zeph hung dangling against the rock wall.

Handsome Hal hastily retreated a few paces, as though unwilling to gaze upon the death of the hapless youngster, but if such was his intention it was speedily altered.

With a short, sharp run, he rose into the air and cleverly cleared the chasm, alighting safely, then running along and grasping the rope

by which Hardy Zeph was being slowly strangled to death, he drew the convulsed body up far enough to allow him to grasp one shoulder.

Easing his hold upon the rope, and steadying himself for a powerful effort, Handsome Hal raised the body of the unconscious trapper above the escarpment, then dragged it to a safe distance from the rift, cutting the noose, after which he sunk down upon the rock, breathless and exhausted.

It was several minutes before Hardy Zeph recovered his senses sufficiently to comprehend that he was still in the land of the living, though he found that fact difficult to reconcile with the appearance of the disfigured outlaw who sat beside him, staring vacantly into his face.

It was a perplexing enigma, which he vainly strove to understand, and in the confusion of ideas which closely followed his recovery, something of these doubts found utterance in the broken sentences which fell from his lips.

"My reasons for acting as I have, ought not to trouble you," said Handsome Hal, in a cold, measured tone of voice. "It should be enough for you that I saved your life, at the cost of staining my hands in the heart's blood of my comrade."

"But why? You helped to hunt me down—"

"Listen, I will tell you," interrupted the disfigured outlaw, his enforced calmness disappearing like magic, his eyes glowing vividly, his scarred face growing more hideous with the swift suffusion of purple blood.

"From the very first I have been your friend. Only for me, you and your mate would have been murdered hours ago. When I was outwardly the most bitter against you, then was I plotting the most earnestly for your safety."

"True, I tracked you to your dug-out, and afterward led Panther Paul and his men thither; but if I had not done it, some one else would, and the prominent part I thus played gave me the right to shape what followed."

"Only for me, you would have been shot down from ambush, for it was the stranger Panther Paul was aiming at, not you; but you had been kind to her, had ventured your life in her defense, and something told me I must be grateful."

"I proposed a long course of tortures, ostensibly that the truth might be forced from you, but more with the hope of being able to set you free."

"The risk was great, but thanks to the death of Parker—to the interference of the terrible Sure Death—I managed to cut your bonds and bid you escape during the confusion."

"To increase your friend's chances of escape, you doubled back, and once more I endeavored to save you—for my stumble was purposely made, and I expected Panther Paul to fall over me."

"From that moment on, I have acted with that one end in view; to save your life at every hazard. Panther Paul would have hurled you down the canyon, but I persuaded him to place you as he did. I hinted at the vague chance of your being rescued by Sure Death, in order to have an excuse for remaining behind, to rescue you myself."

"How the scheme worked, you have seen. I was forced to kill one of the band, but his countless crimes have deserved death a thousand times over. My sleep will never be broken by remorseful dreams on his account!"

Hardy Zeph had listened to this rapid revelation with steadily increasing wonder, but he could not doubt the truth of the outlaw's words.

He strove to express his gratitude, but his brain was still in a dizzy whirl from the terrible suffering he had endured, and his speech was barely coherent.

Handsome Hal checked him with an impatient wave of the hand, saying:

"What I did was through a deeper motive than love for you. Spare your thanks. In a few moments I will show you how you can prove your gratitude."

He arose and flung the noose down into the chasm, then knelt down and rubbed the cloth rope against the sharp edge of the rock until it was worn in two. He dropped the rope down the abyss, arising with a laugh.

"If Panther Paul sends any one to see how you fared, that frayed end will speak louder than words. In your death-struggles, you chafed the rope so it broke, and your body lies down yonder among those black boulders."

"Come. There may be danger for us both here. Panther Paul is suspicious, and he may send some one back. We will go over yonder among the rocks, where we can see without

being seen. Then I will tell you how you can repay me for saving your life."

Slowly and painfully, with stiffened limbs and aching muscles, Hardy Zeph followed the lead of his strange friend, pausing amid a confused mass of blackened rocks, where they could lie low without fear of discovery.

"Tell me what you want, an' ef I kin do it, you won't hev to ax me twice," he said, with an earnestness that caused the eyes of the disfigured outlaw to glow vividly.

"Tell me who and what that woman is—where she is now—all about her—everything you know concerning her," cried Handsome Hal, speaking with feverish rapidity.

"True as the sun is shinin' up yonder, I don't know no more 'bout her then we told you a'ready," said Zeph, with an earnestness that the most skeptical could not doubt. "We never see her afore yesterday. She didn't speak a word all the time she was with us. She slipped away in the night, jist afore you fellers bounced us, leavin' no word or sign ahind her. Bat ef ever there was a crazy woman then she was one."

Handsome Hal abruptly turned his face away from the young trapper, and remained thus for several minutes.

When he again faced Hardy Zeph, all traces of emotion had vanished, and his voice was low, even and cold.

"What do you intend to do next? Ef Panther Paul ever suspects you have escaped the death he invented for you, he will hunt you down like a mad dog."

"He'll find me afore he's ready fer it, meb-be," said Hardy Zeph, with a quiet determination that was even more impressive than fierce, loud-voiced denunciation. "The world ain't big enough fer him an' me both to live in. I'll take his trail, an' never leave it while the breath is in me, or ontel I've tuck his skelp to part pay fer my murdered mate—"

"Your friend is not dead. Panther Paul said he was, only to render his revenge on you the more complete. He was taken prisoner again, and unless something unexpected happens, he will be tortured for a day or two, in order to make him confess."

Hardy Zeph could hardly believe his ears, but Handsome Hal finally convinced him that he spoke the truth.

The young trapper's joy was so overwhelming, and he felt so confident that he could effect the release of his friend, even without weapons, as he was, that Handsome Hal became curious to know on what he founded his hopes.

"If I can assist you, without too plainly betraying my agency, you may command me—for her sake," he said, but Hardy Zeph, while warmly thanking him, replied:

"Ef you don't know, you won't hev to tell no lies. Only this: 'ef you kin, hev my mate kep' in the cabin, an' do you make one o' them as stan' guard outside. Then they cain't no doubt fall onto you, ef my plan succeeds."

"If my pistols were not marked, you should have them," said Handsome Hal, giving Zeph his knife. "But you may fail in your attempt, and the finding of my weapons on your person would be fatal to me."

Hardy Zeph thankfully accepted the weapon, and some further conversation passed between them, which need not be noted in detail.

Handsome Hal promised to do all he could to prevent Dainty Lance from suffering any serious injury, until after that night, at least, for Hardy Zeph admitted that he could do nothing until the darkness should come to cover his movements.

"One thing," said Handsome Hal, after arising and clasping his hands preparatory to separating. "If you ever should meet that—that woman ag'in, ask her if she ever heard of Lena or Lark Metcalfe; don't forget the names. If she says yes, tell her that Lark is still alive and looking for her."

Zeph gave the pledge required, and then they separated, Handsome Hal to race to the dug-out, in order to fatigue himself and give color to the story he had decided to tell, while the young trapper burrowed deeper into the rocks to await the approach of darkness with what patience he could summon.

The hours crept by with provoking slowness, but Hardy Zeph knew that too much depended upon his shoulders for him to risk a miscarriage by undue impatience, and he doggedly remained under cover until the sun had sunk behind the Western hills.

As soon as the shadows were deep enough to cover his advance beyond the danger of being discovered by any of the outlaws who might be

stationed on the high ground above the dug-out, Hardy Zeph stole forward, picking his perilous way through the rocks, crossing or rounding the many rifts and chasms, running no unnecessary risks, for he knew that he had an abundance of time, and until Dainty Lance should be rescued from the grip of Panther Paul, he did not consider his life his own.

Heading so as to clear the rocky ground and strike the river some distance below the dug-out, Hardy Zeph pressed on, and by nine o'clock, was peering forth from a dense clump of bushes which grew upon the bank, keenly and carefully marking down the positions of the guards which he saw had been placed outside of the building.

The stand taken by one of these, appeared to trouble him not a little, and as he saw that the fellow was a stranger, he felt sorry that he had not trusted Handsome Hal more fully.

This guard was squatting close to the edge of a thick clump of bushes, over which had grown a dense mass of wild grape-vines, and was sitting so still that had not Zeph a particular reason for scanning that very point, his form would hardly have been discovered.

For nearly half an hour, the young trapper remained motionless, watching and hoping for this fellow to alter his station, but he appeared perfectly satisfied, and hardly moved a muscle during that period.

Hardy Zeph dared wait no longer, and with a dogged resolution, he noiselessly backed down the bank, making a considerable detour, then crept along the base of the hill, slowly nearing the covert of the outlaw on guard.

His movements were made absolutely without noise, and the oldest, most experienced scout could not have improved upon the skill displayed by the courageous lad.

The outlaw was wide awake, every sense upon the alert, for it chanced that he was one of the most devout believers in the diabolism of Sure Death, whose appearance he expected with the passage of each moment; but sharpened as his senses undoubtedly were, Hardy Zeph stole upon him so noiselessly that he never realized his danger.

With one arm flung around his throat, gripping it so fast and tightly that not a sound could escape his lips, Hardy Zeph drew him backward and drove his long knife to the very hilt in his heart, repeating the blow again and again, nor relaxing his fierce grip until every quiver had deserted the body of the dead man.

Gently lowering the body to the ground, Hardy Zeph gazed keenly around him, stilling his breath in order to listen the more intently; but all was silent. The other outlaws who were stationed outside the building, had not been alarmed by the slight sounds attending the bloody deed.

With a long breath of relief, Hardy Zeph cautiously drew the lifeless body deeper into the shadow, where it would run little risk of discovery in the darkness, even if a search should be instituted, then crept himself beneath the mass of vine-clad bushes.

Here he brushed aside a few dry leaves, grass and some loose earth, uncovering a flat rock some three feet square.

This he cautiously raised up on end, and had there been light enough, a dark cavity, some thing smaller than the rock, would have been revealed.

Into this hole Hardy Zeph crept, feet foremost, carefully lowering the rock over his head, and noiselessly fitting it into place, then turning around and crawling along upon his hands and knees through the intense darkness.

After proceeding some twenty yards, he reached a barrier, and listening for a few moments he groped around until his hand encountered a stout wooden pin, which he silently worked out of its socket.

Then slowly and steadily pressing upon the barrier, he caused it to move, one end from the other toward him, a faint light streaming through the crevice thus formed.

The moment he could obtain a partial view of the interior of the dug-out, Zeph ceased his pressure, his heart fairly leaping into his throat; for a low, warning hiss came to his ears—the signal that had often been of service between himself and Dainty Lance.

Handsome Hal had done even more than he agreed, for before leaving the dug-out he managed to tell Dainty Lance that his comrade was alive and well; that he had sworn to set him free before that night passed.

Though he hardly dared believe this glorious news, the young trapper, ever since Panther Paul and his men fell asleep, scarcely removed his eyes from the corner of the room where, if

at all, he knew that Hardy Zeph must put in an appearance.

In another place it has been mentioned that the walls of the dug-out were hung around with skin and furs.

This was mainly to secure greater warmth, but they also served to conceal a cunning contrivance, made by Hardy Zeph during his leisure hours in the long evenings.

He had cut a hole through the wall in that corner, saving the bark, which was carefully glued on other timbers forming a door, only working on a pivot, instead of hinges.

From this a tunnel had been dug, running some twenty yards, reaching the open air around the shoulder of the hill, and out of sight of the building itself. This entrance came up amid the vine-clad bushes, and was still further concealed by the flat rock, as described.

The pin which fastened this pivot door in place, was concealed by a piece of the rough bark, cunningly sliding in a groove, and the joints were so carefully made that only on a close inspection could they be discovered.

Dainty Lance saw the skins gently pushed aside, and fearful lest some one of the sleepers should be aroused, made the signal of danger. But as they still slept on, giving no sign of arousing he gave another note that told his friend the danger was past.

Gently the door was opened, and Hardy Zeph entered the room, knife in hand, with which he speedily set his comrade and heart-brother at liberty.

With a finger upon his lips, Dainty Lance pointed his other hand to the revolvers and rifles which the outlaws had laid aside before lying down, then nodded toward the tunnel. Hardy Zeph grinned knowingly, and with cat-like footsteps, the two daring youngsters proceeded to despoil the sleeping enemy, carrying the weapons to the tunnel and stowing them away.

"We kin massacre 'em all, now," muttered Hardy Zeph, vengefully, as he glared out at the sleeping outlaw chief.

But at that moment Panther Paul stirred, and Dainty Lance noiselessly swung the pivot-door shut.

CHAPTER XI.

HOLDING THE FORT.

THIS was so adroitly done, and the skins fell back so snugly into place, that Panther Paul and his astounded fellows possessed no clew to the mysterious vanishment, and no sooner did they rush out of the building, than Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph opened the door to the "rat-hole," and immediately took possession of their own, by slamming shut the outer door and dropping the stout bars into place.

Despite his natural excitement, Panther Paul heard the noise of the door closing behind him, but his search inside had been so thorough that he never once suspected that he had been outwitted until, unable longer to restrain their sense of triumph, the two youngsters gave vent to a wild cheer of mocking defiance and exultation.

For a moment the outlaw chief stood as though stupefied, but then his wildest passions assumed control, and with an angry yell that would not have disgraced his namesake, he rushed at the door and hurled himself against the barrier in the vain attempt to burst it open.

Superstitious though the great majority of them were, his men rarely shrunk back from following when Panther Paul led, nor did they now.

In a body they rushed against the door, their weight shaking it and causing the bars to rattle slightly within, but nothing more. The barrier had been built with an eye to just such an emergency, and nobly stood the test.

Neither Dainty Lance nor Hardy Zeph were inclined to stand on ceremony with the outlaws. They had been abused, maltreated, wounded, hunted almost to death. They would have been more or less than human, if they had not felt a wild thrill of satisfaction at the opportunity thus afforded them of making their accounts a little more even, or if they had hesitated a moment in taking advantage of the chance.

There was no need for words. Each saw the opening, and each sprang to a leap, throwing it open and thrusting a revolver, snatched up from the confiscated stock, through the aperture, opened a rapid cross-fire upon the crowd before the door.

The darkness without, rendered any attempt at taking aim a very dubious process, else the outlaws would have paid dearly for the impetuosity of their leader. As it was, though the firing was directed only by the confused thump-

ing against the door, more than one of the leaden missiles found its billet, and wild yells of pain were mingled with curses of rage, as the outlaws hastily beat a retreat.

Not all. Lying upon the blood-bespinkled ground, his distorted features turned upward toward the starless sky, and fast stiffening in the embrace of death, was one who would never again stain his hands in blood, or his heart in crime.

The young trappers were ignorant of this fact, though they knew that their lead had not been altogether wasted. And they knew, too, that there would be no more such open assaults. The position was too strong, the numbers of the outlaw band too small for that.

"But they won't give it up so easy, nuther," said Hardy Zeph, with a grim smile of exultation which told how willingly he would grant the enemy more satisfaction. "That Panther Paul is p'izen clean through, an' he'll try all he knows fer to git a little more'n squar'. But it'll be by sarcumvention, rather than open fightin'."

In a few words as possible, he made known the main points of his adventures, and cautioned Dainty Lance against firing at Handsome Hal, their secret friend.

"They'll find out how we come to fool 'em, as soon as it gets light, if not afore. The critter I knifed by the hole, an' the tracks I left, 'll show 'em the way, an' unless I miss my guess, they'll take a notion to follow the same trail."

"We can fasten the entrance on this side—" "That wouldn't do much good, ef they was to think o' tryin' a lot o' powder an' a slow match. They could blow the hull side o' the shanty in!"

From his manner of speaking, more than by his words, Dainty Lance knew that Hardy Zeph had thought of a safeguard against this danger, and quietly bade him set to work, volunteering to keep guard while he was thus occupied, asking no questions, such was his faith in the cunning and resources of his mate.

Hardy Zeph selected a couple of revolvers from the stock captured from the outlaws, then took one of the "home-made lamps"—a battered tin can full of grease, with a twisted rag for a wick—a stout string, a couple of small sticks, and opening the pivot door, crawled into the dark tunnel.

He cautiously groped his way along, not having lighted the lamp, lest its rays should betray him to the enemy, but he found the passage unoccupied, nor could his most intent listening catch any suspicious sounds from without, as he pressed his ear close to the flat stone.

Gently, bit by bit, he raised the covering, listening all the while, but a few moments thus convinced him that none of the enemy were near at that moment.

Guided by the sense of touch, he knotted one end of the string to a corner of the stone, in such a manner that it could not be seen by any one outside, until the covering was raised, then lowered the stone into position once more.

Striking a match, he lit the lamp, placing it where the dim rays would fall upon his work.

Breaking the sticks into fragments to suit his purpose, Hardy Zeph planted the butts of the two revolvers in the hard ground, by aid of his knife, inclining them so that their muzzles pointed up at the flat stone, supporting their barrels on sticks stuck in the ground and crossed at the proper height.

Two smaller sticks were planted just back of the trigger-guards; the string attached to the stone was passed around these sticks, then knotted firmly to the triggers; the hammers were raised, and Hardy Zeph chuckled grimly as he eyed his novel "door-bell."

If any one, guided by the sign around, should attempt to raise the flat stone from without, doing so would infallibly discharge the weapons, and even should the stone stop the bullets, they would believe the passage was stoutly defended, while the noise would warn those in the dug-out of the attempt.

Considerable time was consumed by this work, and when Hardy Zeph returned to the cabin, he found that the enemy had not been idle.

"They are gathering grass and brush, thinking to burn us out," said Dainty Lance in a guarded whisper, as his comrade rejoined him. "They are cautious, and the darkness has hindered me from getting a glimpse of any one, yet the rustling sound against the door betrays their purpose."

"Watch fer the man that strikes a light, an' one o' us ought to salivate him," coolly responded Zeph, but little concerned, for he knew that the green cottonwood of which the building was composed, was almost fire-proof.

If they were cool and watchful, the enemy was cunning, and the pile of brush was fired without the watchful trappers obtaining a single glimpse of the incendiary, who dropped a blazing torch into the pile from the top of the cabin, or torched the hill into which the building was set.

The next half-hour was one of strong anxiety for our friends, but at the end of that time, they saw the fire dying out for want of fuel, which could not be provided by the disappointed outlaws, without entering the circle of light and thus exposing themselves to almost certain death.

As it was, one of their number was shot dead in his tracks by Dainty Lance, while throwing sticks and chunks of solid wood into the fire from the brush-lined bank of the stream, and this lesson kept the others closely covered.

The fire died out without doing more than scorch and sear the door a little, and then day dawned.

Eagerly the young trappers sought to catch a glimpse of the enemy, for they felt that they had not had half enough revenge for all they had suffered, but in vain. To all appearance the outlaws had given it up for a bad job, and beaten a retreat as the day dawned.

But the youngsters were too experienced to take this for granted, and kept at a safe distance from the loop-holes, even while taking observations. The darkness within the building enabled them to do this, since the only light came in through the loop-holes.

Leaving Dainty Lance to keep guard, Hardy Zeph busied himself in what seemed on the surface a very childish fashion, tying a white handkerchief over a bundle of grass from one of the bunks, and then painting with soot and red clay, a rude representation of a human face.

At first Dainty Lance was puzzled, but as the features became more lifelike, he smiled grimly, and was ready to play his part when the image was completed.

Hardy Zeph held the manikin close up to one of the loops, as though some one was striving to learn whether the coast was clear, and a moment later a rifle ball knocked the bundle out of his hand, while a wild yell of exultation followed the spot.

Quick as a flash, Dainty Lance sent a bullet into the curl of smoke, and the outlaw rolled over and over in death-agony.

An irregular volley was discharged at the building, but the youngsters shouted with mocking defiance, and the enemy, though realizing how completely they had been outwitted, did not break cover.

Having learnt all they wished to know, it was decided that Hardy Zeph should lie down and take a good sleep, in order to be the better able to stand guard when night should come again, Dainty Lance promising to arouse him the moment that the outlaws made any serious move.

Critical as their situation undeniably was, Hardy Zeph found no difficulty in going to sleep, and soon his heavy breathing gave evidence of dreamless forgetfulness.

Hour after hour passed without any sign from the enemy without, but then, at about mid-afternoon, there came a change.

Dainty Lance caught the sound of rapidly advancing hoof-strokes, and as he listened, a volley was fired, not at the dug-out.

There came a piercing shriek—a woman's voice!

CHAPTER XII.

AN IMPORTANT CAPTURE.

It would be a futile attempt to paint the feelings of Panther Paul on realizing how thoroughly he had been outwitted, for it is hardly necessary to say that he did not share in the superstitious belief of his men, that the foul fiend himself had taken a hand in the game and was warring against them.

Always obstinate, he now swore he would never give over until he had slain the inmates of the dug-out, be they one or many, and in person led the desperate attempts already recorded.

After the death-shot fired by Dainty Lance, he relapsed into sullen silence, keeping close covered, racking his brains for some plan by which he might accomplish his desired ends.

His force was too weak to carry the cabin by assault, in the broad light of day, now reduced to four men besides Handsome Hal and himself.

Early in the morning, the disfigured outlaw had been dispatched to ascertain what truth there was in the story told by the party sent in quest of Sure Death, and on his return he con-

firmed the suspicions of Panther Paul that the superstitious fellows had hidden in idleness when they were supposed to be at work, and that their report was but a fabrication.

The leader of the scouting band was dead, and his force so greatly reduced that Panther Paul did not see fit to call the others to account for their part in the deception.

So the hours passed, lying in ambush from whence they could command the building, until the same sound of hoof-strokes that startled Dainty Lance, drew their attention to the level ground beyond, where they saw a horse and rider, both of which were instantly recognized.

The animal was that recently owned by old Dan Darby, while the form in the saddle was the same as that which they had chased so madly and far over the rocky tract—the form of the person, man or woman, whom they devoutly believed was none other than Sure Death, the Mystic Marksman!

Panther Paul trembled in every limb when he made this discovery; so did each one of his followers, but the chief alone was actuated by a fierce, deadly rage.

"Shoot when I do," he grated, preparing his rifle. "Aim at the horse. If the rider is touched by lead, I will murder you all! He must die by torture!"

It was well for Handsome Hal, perhaps, that his mates were too greatly excited to notice him, for at the first words of Panther Paul, the disfigured outlaw crept nearer, a desperate light in his eyes, a revolver cocked and covering the back of his chief.

He believed the strange woman was his wife, supposed to be long since dead, and he was ready to defend her with his life.

He lowered his weapon when Panther Paul concluded, but still kept a wary look out over the outlaws, ready to foil any treachery if such should be contemplated.

Riding at a gentle trot, the strange woman came steadily on, all unsuspecting of danger, her first intimation of it coming in the rapid volley that killed her horse in its tracks, so suddenly that she had not time to clear her feet from the stirrups before she was pinned to the ground as the animal fell and rolled over on its side.

Yelling in mad triumph, the outlaws beheld the fall of—as they supposed—this terrible foe, and forgetting all else in their exultation, they broke cover and hastened to make good their advantage before Sure Death could recover.

Dainty Lance was on the alert, and his rifle spoke, sending its lead straight through the heart of the nearest ruffian, cutting short the fierce yell that hung upon his lips.

Handsome Hal was first to reach the side of the fallen stranger, and it was his hand that took the revolver from her grasp, that she might not court certain death by a fruitless resistance, and his enormous strength that rolled the dead animal from her right foot and leg.

But even while doing this, he kept his hat slouched and his face averted, as though dreading recognition, and then he drew back to give place to Panther Paul.

With difficulty choking down his powerful emotions, the outlaw chief gazed down upon the disarmed woman, who made no attempt to arise, but lay as she had fallen, the wild, hunted light deepening in her great eyes as she returned his gaze, like a trembling bird that is being fascinated by some terrible serpent.

Panther Paul remembered what Hardy Zeph had said: that the woman was undoubtedly mad; and as he gazed, the impression grew upon him that the young trapper had spoken the truth.

Still, everything pointed to this person as the mystic being whom the band had named Sure Death, and with a hard laugh at her trembling shrinking from his touch, he bent over and searched her person closely for the weapon which had so nearly exterminated his once powerful band.

But his quest was in vain. Save the two revolvers and a knife, which Handsome Hal had deprived her of, the strange woman had been wholly unarmed.

Still unconvinced, he questioned her closely, but without better success. Not a word or sound could he extract from her lips, either by threats or persuasion, and he began to believe that she was dumb, if not deaf.

"I'll find that out," he growled, fiercely. "I'll tie her up and play Indian with her until she will be glad to let out the truth. Woman or not, she must know something about this Sure Death, and that something she must confess!"

"I don't think you will go quite so far as that, captain," said Handsome Hal, his voice

low, even and cold as ever. "I believe I have some claims on you, for services rendered?"

"You have saved my life on three separate occasions," returned Panther Paul, laughing. "Whatever society may think, I am grateful for the treble gift."

"Then you will hardly torture this woman," added Handsome Hal, breathing the words softly in his ear, "when I tell you that she is my wife, whom I long believed dead."

The countenance of Panther Paul darkened and grew actually repulsive as he listened to this revelation. His voice was dogged as he replied:

"She must tell what she knows. If she will confess by your persuasion, good enough. If not—"

There was no need for him to complete the sentence. His face spoke plainer than words, and Handsome Hal saw that his expressed gratitude was only lip deep.

If the outlaw felt hurt at this repayment of his long devotion, he did not show it in either voice or manner.

"Let me talk to her by myself, then, and I pledge my word to learn the truth if possible. She is afraid of you. She will not speak while you are near."

Panther Paul gazed at him keenly, then said, with a hard laugh:

"You shall have your way, but if out of ear-shot, we will be within pistol-shot. That is a caution, not a threat."

"You should know best whether I deserve either. For the five years that I have served you, have I ever given you cause for doubt or suspicion? You know I have not. But let it pass. I claim your promise. Go back beyond ear-shot, you and the boys."

A little abashed by the dignified manner so suddenly assumed by the disfigured outlaw, Panther Paul obeyed, and with his men withdrew a few yards; but at a word his followers held their weapons in readiness for instant use.

Handsome Hal raised the woman to her feet, and assisted her to a flat rock which lay near the base of the hill.

He was watched intently and with growing curiosity by his mates, who noted his every action since they could not hear the words he uttered.

The strange woman visibly shrunk away from him, but he continued to speak, as though unconscious of this repulsion.

His gestures were animated, and finally he removed his hat, standing uncovered before the woman, who gazed at him for a moment, then shrunk still further away, covering her eyes with her hands, as though to shut out some loathsome sight.

Handsome Hal had forgotten his terribly scarred features, and as soon as he could recover from his disappointment, he tried another plan.

In a low, gentle voice that sounded strangely out of place, coming from such a being, and in such a wild spot, he began a song, the air alone of which reached the ears of the onlookers.

But they could see that the woman was affected by the music, and in a few moments more, her voice joined in the song—only to cease abruptly as she removed her hands and once more looked upon the disfigured countenance, now more distorted than ever, from the terrible emotion with which Handsome Hal was struggling.

He ceased, unable to longer sing, but a few words dropped from his lips—three names were uttered; the names of a husband and wife and their little year-old boy.

Those words completed what the song had begun, and the mental fetters that had held the brain of the poor woman for years, were broken asunder. A sobbing cry burst from her lips, and as Handsome Hal extended his arms, she arose and sprung into them, lying on his breast, while he rained passionate kisses upon her lips and pallid face.

Panther Paul sidged nervously at this, and then, unable to longer restrain his impatience, he called aloud to Handsome Hal, bidding him spare these heroes until after he had learned the truth concerning Sure Death.

This rude speech served to recall the husband to his senses, and gently lowering his wife to the rock, he sat down beside her, speaking earnestly, with more than one gesture toward the outlaw chief and his curious men.

After a time he arose, and leaving the woman seated on the rock, passed over to where Panther Paul was awaiting him.

"We were both right, captain," he said, with a calmness that seemed doubly remarkable from following so closely after his strong excitement and agitation. "She is my wife, whom I have

believed dead these many years. She was crazed, but my singing the song and mentioning the name of our dead baby boy, to soothe whom she used ever to sing that same song, has restored her to her right mind."

"But Sure Death!" impatiently demanded Panther Paul.

"That is where you are right," was the quiet response. "She has been strangely connected with that fellow—for he is as human as either you or I, captain—and can tell you all about him, even the place where he may now be found."

Panther Paul waited to hear no more, but rushed over to where the woman sat, followed by his three men, bold enough now that they were assured the terrible Sure Death was no more than a mortal man like themselves.

Panther Paul poured question after question upon the woman, who was frightened by his vehemence, and hesitated in replying.

Then, without the slightest warning, that dull, sickening explosion was heard again, and without a groan, one of the outlaws sunk to the ground, a headless corpse!

Panther Paul brushed the mingled blood and brains from his face, but almost ere he could realize the terrible truth, the Mystic Marksman claimed another victim.

With a wild yell of ferocious rage, the outlaw chief glared around him in search of the hidden danger, for the first time a glimmer of the truth flashing upon him.

He caught a glimpse of what seemed a human form in a clump of bushes upon the river bank, and leaped toward it, firing as he advanced.

And even as he did so, that horrible explosion was heard once more, and the last of the outlaws fell dead!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MYSTIC MARKSMAN AT LAST.

At his second shot, Panther Paul saw the dark gray object amid the bushes fall to the ground, and he yelled fiercer than ever, for he believed he had kept his oath and killed Sure Death at last.

Straight on he dashed, unknowing or indifferent to the fact of his being the sole survivor of the once dreaded and notorious band, with the single exception of Handsome Hal. Straight on, but the cup of vengeance was dashed from his lips before he could more than taste its contents in imagination.

An athletic form arose from a clump of bushes a little to the right, and with one enormous leap stood within arm's length of Panther Paul, from whose lips burst a cry of angry astonishment as he recognized the form and features of Handsome Hal.

That scarred countenance was rendered doubly hideous now, through the workings of a long-suppressed hatred. His eyes were on fire, his white teeth gleaming through his mustache, a snarling yell issuing from his throat.

"Sure Death is here, Panther Paul! A devil you have lived, a liar you shall die, for mine shall be the vengeance!"

Whatever else he was, Panther Paul was no coward. Whirling to meet his one-time follower face to face, he thrust forward his revolver and discharged it, so close to the head of his antagonist that the flame singed his hair; but a mocking laugh came from the avenger's lips, and the next moment his deadly gripe was fastened upon the outlaw chief.

Athletic, muscular man though he was, Panther Paul seemed no more than an infant in the terrible grasp of his enemy, who raised him from the ground, shook him fiercely as a terrier might a rat, then flung him with stunning force to the ground.

Such was the thrilling tableau that greeted the gaze of Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph as they slowly advanced, hand on weapons in case of need.

They had recognized the woman's scream which followed the volley, and in hopes of foiling the evil desires of Panther Paul, they crept through the tunnel, cut the string and displaced Zeph's "door-bell," raised the flat stone, and peering out through the dense screen of bushes, were just in time to witness the death of the third outlaw, the rush of Handsome Hal, and the result of his brief struggle with Panther Paul.

Ignorant of the service which they had rendered her, while her brain was still clouded, the strange woman no sooner saw the youngsters approaching than she uttered a warning cry, and snatched a revolver from the belt of the dead outlaw lying nearest her.

A quick, sharp shout from Handsome Hal was all that saved the young trappers from

being saluted by a shot that might easily be fatal, at such short range.

A few words served to explain matters sufficiently for the present, and then Handsome Hal set about binding his prisoner hand and foot, before he could fairly recover his senses from that terrible fall.

The youngsters had been within earshot when Handsome Hal declared his identity with the terrible Sure Death of whom they had heard so much during the last day or two, but what they heard then only served to whet their curiosity, and Hardy Zeph put the question bluntly:

"You shall hear everything that I can tell you," replied Handsome Hal, arising from beside the now helpless outlaw chief. "But the story is a long one, and though there is nothing more to be feared from this band—for he alone survives—the sound of firearms may bring down other enemies upon us. Let us toss this carrion into the river, then get indoors."

There could be no objection made to this proposal, and a few minutes later the dead or claws were tossed into the swiftly-running waters, which swept them from sight forever. Then Panther Paul was carried into the dug-out, and laid upon one of the bunks, where he listened with a frightful interest to the strange, wild tale told by Handsome Hal.

A brief synopsis is all that the limited space at command will admit of our giving here, but the telling consumed hours, and extended far into the night.

Between five and six years before, Lark Metcalfe was a quiet, peaceable settler on the Eastern frontier of Kansas, content in his fairly stocked farm, his loving wife and one baby boy. But then, more through pure deviltry than aught else, for little profit could they expect to reap from a simple farmer and stock-grower, a band of road-agents made a descent upon the happy home.

Surprised though they were, both Lark and his wife fought desperately, but the end was certain. They were killed, as all supposed, the cabin fired, the stock driven off to be sold miles away.

How they escaped the devouring flames, neither man nor wife could ever explain, but Lark was found far out on the prairie by some of his neighbors, and when he awoke, it was as a raging madman.

Some bones were found among the ashes of the destroyed cabin, and buried by the rough frontiersmen with more than one tear, as all that remained of Lena Metcalfe and her child.

They told Lark this, when he recovered his senses, a terribly scarred and disfigured wreck of his former self, and he believed, as they did, that they spoke the truth.

From that time on he lived only for revenge.

Through all his delirium he remembered the faces he had seen during that deadly fight for his dear ones, and soon became convinced that the murderers were the band commanded by Panther Paul.

Secure in his disfigurement, he resolved to join the band, the better to carry out his designs, but first he made a journey to St. Louis, where resided an odd genius, a friend of his, from whom he obtained the terrible weapon which had given him the title of Sure Death: an air pistol of unusual accuracy and power, together with a number of percussion bullets, which would explode with frightful force, on striking a bone. For this reason, an unerring shot, he always aimed at the head of his chosen victim, which was invariably so shattered that none could tell from which direction the fatal shot had been sped.

"One by one I claimed my victims, slaying them under circumstances that could not arouse suspicion of my agency in the matter, until two nights since, when Bradford fell by my hand."

"A moment later, as though hovering upon the edge of one of the storm-clouds, I beheld the face and shoulders of my wife, looking as fair and young as she did on that day, before those devils came down upon us—and the sight drew a cry of terror from my lips."

"You suspected me then, Panther Paul, for the first time, but in allowing me time for reflection, you sealed your own fate."

"Of what followed there is no need of speaking at length."

"On that day, as twice before, I saved your life, Panther Paul; but it was through no love for you. I wanted you to live until you had witnessed the death of each one of your comrades in crime—to torture you by the knowledge that you were ever haunted by a relentless enemy, who never struck but to slay. And then I had sworn that you should die by my hand, after I had told you everything—after

you knew whom you had to thank for your ruined hopes, your frustrated plans, the destruction of your band—then I would slay you, not suddenly and painlessly as your fellows had fallen, but suffering death by inches, death in every breath that you drew—until you should beg and pray for me to deal the finishing blow and set your spirit free.

"It was my hand that killed Dan Darby, that shot Parker down, who alone of all my victims suspected the truth ere he died; for he saw me aiming at him; but I threw you off the scent, and sent you after an imaginary Sure Death. I cut the bonds of your prisoners. I volunteered to remain with Hampton, in order to set him, yonder, free. To do this I killed Hampton. I lent the young man my knife, and I saw him kill Brown with it, last night. I knew that he was working to set his friend free, and I concealed the stone that covers the secret passage by which he entered this cabin.

From the first I have foiled every important movement you made, while appearing your most devoted follower. For years I have tasted of revenge, but now the time has come when I mean to drain the cup dry.

"Panther Paul, to-morrow you die the death of a dog!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FATE OF PANTHER PAUL.

THE sun was just arising over the eastern hills, when a little band slowly wound its devious way through the broken masses of rock which lay beyond the dug-out.

Side by side, whenever the nature of the ground would permit, rode the strangely severed and still more strangely reunited man and wife.

Lark Metcalfe held one end of a lasso, the noose of which was looped around the throat of Panther Paul who, his arms bound behind him, was thus forced to walk to the doom that had been decreed him.

His pale and deep-lined features told how severely he had suffered, mentally if not bodily, since the wonderful revelation of the past night.

Behind him, upon foot, followed Dainty Lance and Hardy Zeph, the former grave and serious as befitted the act of retribution he was about to witness, the latter fairly running over with a fierce delight peculiarly his own. For it was by his suggestion that Panther Paul was doomed to suffer as he had suffered, to reap the crop he had sowed for another's evil and destruction.

Not a word was spoken by any of the party, and as the rock-rift was neared, they separated in silence, Handsome Hal, his wife and their wretched captive making a detour that would carry them around the barrier, while the young trappers slowly proceeded direct to the spot opposite where Hardy Zeph had so nearly ended his earthly career.

The latter ventured a remark or two, concerning the approaching execution, but the gravity with which Dainty Lance received them, soon caused him to relapse into silence, though his dancing eyes and the grim smiles which occasionally curled his lips, proved that he was none the less hugely enjoying his revenge in anticipation.

Half an hour later, Handsome Hal and his companions made their appearance on the further side of the rift, and dismounting, the avenger coldly and methodically proceeded to execute his long-deferred vengeance.

With a calm composure that showed how dreadfully her womanly nature had been warped by the sufferings she had borne, Lena Metcalfe lent her husband what aid he required, assisting to lower Panther Paul to the narrow ledge on which Hardy Zeph had passed an hour of agony, then drew the lasso taut and fastened it firmly to the boulder above, while Handsome Hal kept Panther Paul in an upright position, by means of a second rope.

Then this was withdrawn, and the doomed man stood there between life and death, hopelessly doomed.

Dainty Lance watched the proceedings with a growing dislike, and now, unable to longer refrain, though he knew that he was spending his breath in vain, he begged Handsome Hal to relent.

A hard laugh was the only response. His wrongs and sufferings had been too great for even the thought of mercy to be entertained.

Dainty Lance said no more, but sat there, a stern resolve shaping itself in his mind as he watched the doomed criminal.

The firmness of Panther Paul had been greatly shaken by the revelation made on the past night. Though he made no appeal for mercy, knowing that such would be worse than useless, and that it would only increase the ferocious

enjoyment of the avenger, he was weak and unnerved, trembling in every limb, and scarcely able to stiffen his muscles sufficiently to keep his feet from at once slipping from the narrow ledge.

He knew he was doomed beyond earthly help, yet he felt that life was very sweet, and strove to retain his precarious footing so desperately that the cold sweat stood thickly upon his face and neck.

But all in vain!

His muscles relaxed despite himself, and his piercing scream of horrible fear was cut short as his feet slipped from the rock and the noose closed around his throat.

Swift as thought Dainty Lance raised his rifle and fired, the bullet cutting the lasso, which parted with a sharp twang, and the body of Panther Paul shot down to death upon the ragged rocks below!

Handsome Hal half-raised his pistol, but his wife clung to his arm, and bade him remember how the trappers had befriended her.

Then, without a word of parting, they mounted their horses and rode slowly away, passing forever out of the lives of the young trappers.

THE END.

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